

Teaching English to Large Classes:

Part One

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EVERY TEACHER of a large class is haunted by the knowledge that he ought to give more individual attention to his pupils. He knows that real progress in learning a foreign language is largely dependent upon having plenty of opportunities for practising the correct use of the language. He knows that if pupils repeat wrong forms uncorrected they are only learning these more thoroughly, but he feels that it is next to impossible to give every pupil an opportunity of speaking or reading in every lesson. Written work, of course, does provide a chance for everybody to express something in the foreign language, but how can he cope with all the correcting that this involves? Let me give one or two examples. While I was watching a competent teacher at work in a class of over 40 boys in their fourth year of English, I kept count of every boy who opened his lips during the lesson. The total was 17. Several boys spoke more than once, the brighter ones. The teacher agreed that it was possible that some boys never spoke once during a week of six lessons. My companion on this visit, intrigued by this discovery, amused himself by making a similar count in several other classrooms, and told me that he did not find any teacher with so good a score. In every other class, fewer than 17 boys had spoken in English.

In another class of over 40 pupils in their second year, the teacher, determined that everyone should speak, had every pupil repeat the answer to every question. It does not require much imagination to picture the boredom of that class or the small amount of work covered. It is, perhaps, not surprising also that pupils at the end of the round of repetitions often made mistakes that the teacher had corrected near the beginning.

I have, however, tried out and seen a number of ways of providing for more expression on the part of the pupils. All the ways that I shall describe have been used in ordinary classrooms by different teachers. For the most part, they were teachers of junior classes, that is, non-graduate teachers handling the first three years of English. The exception is the group method, that is,

the division of the class into small groups, each under a pupil leader. This method I have observed used equally well in beginners' classes and matriculation classes, though naturally with some differences.

The devices for handling large classes may conveniently be divided into three groups:

1. Chorus speaking, in which a number of pupils answer questions or read together;
2. Short individual controlled answers and sentence-by-sentence reading;
3. Group methods.

Naturally there are points for and against all of these methods. It is as well to accept the fact that there is no perfect solution to the problem of the large class except that of breaking it up into smaller classes, and that any devices are at best a makeshift. Success in using these devices depends upon the details of organization, details which must be understood thoroughly by the pupils if they are to respond and get the best from the devices. The organization of each of the three devices mentioned above will be described in turn, the advantages and disadvantages discussed and considered.

Chorus Speaking

Chorus speaking may be divided into reading together and answering together. Let us consider reading together first as this has always been used to a certain extent.

The obvious disadvantages of having the whole class read aloud together are that they may disturb adjoining classes and that, with so many pupils reading at the same time, the teacher cannot detect individual mistakes. In the early stages especially, the pupil is usually concentrating so hard on trying to say the words that he does not listen to what other pupils around him are saying and may make many mistakes in pronunciation which go undetected. In answer to the first disadvantage, it is only necessary to say that it is not very difficult to train children to read quietly. This

is often more easily managed if the teacher can move among the pupils while they are reading. He can immediately identify and check noisy readers, and the pupils know that he will hear them, at least when he is standing near them. Pupils often shout in an attempt to be heard by the teacher. As he moves around, the teacher also has the chance of detecting mistaken pronunciations.

It is more satisfactory, however, to have the class read in sections. The back row, for example, may read together, or a block of two rows from back to front, preferably a section where it is possible for the teacher to stand near the pupils who are reading. When a smaller number of pupils read together, it is much easier for the teacher to detect the pupil who is making a mistake. If he is to do this, it is important that the pupils should really read together, that is, they should all say the same word at the same time.

This needs practice and training, particularly in the early stages. The pupils must be trained to speak rhythmically. It is assumed, of course, that pupils will have been drilled in the pronunciation of new words before they are asked to read a passage, so that there need be no hesitation over unfamiliar words.

Every teacher is familiar with the idea of the teacher's 'model reading'. The teacher reads a paragraph, or perhaps two paragraphs, before asking the class to read. The disadvantage of this is that by the time the teacher has finished the pupils have forgotten how he read the first sentence. If the pupils are to be trained in reading with the right stress and rhythm, they must have small units to imitate. The teacher must read a sentence, or even part of a sentence, and the pupils must copy him. I have watched this being done in a second-year class with excellent results. The teacher was a good reader himself, and this method of reading after the teacher had developed rhythmic reading in his pupils, so that when individual pupils were asked to read a paragraph, they were able to do so in a pleasing manner not often found in pupils at that stage. Their chorus reading, not led by the teacher, was also good. Rather to my surprise, I found this method of imitating the teacher acceptable to a class of adult students at advanced level who were interested in improving their pronunciation and had realized that stress and rhythm were important. I mention this as, when I first encountered it, I thought that it would be successful only where it was possible for the teacher to read a whole sentence at a time for the class to imitate, and that it would break down with longer sentences. Instead, I found it invaluable with long sentences for showing where the

natural breaks come, and where, for example, the voice should fall and where it should be kept up.

This reading after the teacher can be done by the whole class together quietly, or it can be done by the class reading in sections as suggested above. Each section can read a whole paragraph sentence by sentence after the teacher, or each section of the class can read one sentence. The teacher needs to decide on the units he is going to use, so that he need only refer to them for the class to know what he wants. There is no difficulty in using rows across the classroom. All the teacher needs to say is, 'Read after me. Front row first sentence, second row next sentence, and so on.' If the teacher wishes to work in rows running from the front to the back of the class, it is usually better to take two rows together. In my experience, pupils are often seated in dual desks or in single desks pushed together in pairs, so that there are a number of blocks of desks in the room. These blocks may be numbered or lettered. What is important is that the teacher should have a system and that the pupils should know it, so that he will only have to refer to it for the pupils to know exactly what he wants them to do. 'Read after me. Block A first sentence, B second sentence, and so on.' The teacher can vary his use of the sections, but if the pupils know that he will use one or the other he can get things moving by simple directions without waste of time.

This imitative reading can be used in all classes at times for practice in stress and rhythm. It also provides, as will have readily been seen, for the active participation of everybody in the class. Where individual mistakes are detected they should be noted and corrected either on the spot or in a brief practice at the end of the reading with the pupils concerned. This latter method is on the whole preferable to interrupting the reading. The teacher needs a list of the pupils, not in alphabetic or register order, but in the order in which they are sitting. If he uses two ways of dividing his class into sections, he must have two lists. He can then easily make a mark against a pupil's name if he detects him making a mistake. The use of these lists will be discussed further in the section on individual controlled answers.

Chorus answering of questions and chorus drill exercises have much in common with chorus reading, but there are some differences. It is rarely advisable for the whole class to answer at once, but if the sections are used it is generally possible for the teacher to hear if a mistake is made. Sentences can be read from substitution tables, section by section, but here again a little organization is necessary. The teacher must

indicate in which column of the table the substitutions are to be made first. To give an example:

I am		listen to the radio	this evening
He is	going to	play football	tomorrow
We are		buy some books	on Saturday

The teacher says, 'Exercise I. Substitution table, Block A begin. Line 1 of the table. Change column 1.'

Block A reads, 'I am going to listen to the radio this evening. He is going to listen to the radio this evening. We are going to listen to the radio this evening.'

Teacher: 'Block B. Change column 3.'

Block B: 'I am going to listen to the radio this evening. I am going to play football this evening. I am going to buy some books this evening.'

Teacher: 'Block C. Line 3. Change column 4.'

Block C: 'We are going to play football this evening. We are going to play football tomorrow. We are going to play football on Saturday.' And so on.

Conversion exercises of the type, 'Turn into questions.' 'Change to past tense', are best handled in another way. A chorus answer is often confusing. One pupil may be asked for the answer and when the teacher has accepted it, he says 'Repeat', and the section repeats the answer. The next question is answered by a pupil in the next section which repeats his correct answer. This method may be used also in answering comprehension questions.

The great advantage of chorus answering is that it ensures more active participation on the part of all the pupils and not just of those fortunate enough to be asked to read or answer a question. A routine helps considerably and, as there are not likely to be more than five or six sections, the teacher can keep to routine and need not 'dodge' with his questions. He should, however, begin with different sections at different times, but keep the same order.