

HOW TO TEACH LARGE CLASSES

Ho Minh Thang, M.A.

I. Abstract

Class size is one of the mostly concerned factors to any educational system for the success of teaching and learning process. At university, it is considerably acceptable for a teacher to teach a class of any size (small or large) as a common norm. However, when the classes are too large, they are supposed to contain some common challenges related to the teaching and learning process. No matter how big the class size is, the teachers are expected to teach and assess students adequately and effectively. This paper demonstrates a general reflection on the author's personal experiences with teaching many large classes at undergraduate level at the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City for the time of over five years from 2010 to 2015. The paper targets at sharing this personal view of experiences with fellow educators who may find themselves in similar situations of



teaching and assessing large groups of students at any level of education, particularly at universities. Although what constitutes a large class has been a subject of debate in literature, the author adopts from previous authors to define “a large class as one in which characteristics and conditions present themselves as inter-related and collective constraints that impede meaningful teaching and learning”. Besides, through the formally well-organised conference at Can Tho University in April and the monthly seminar at the English of Foreign Languages, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City in July, the author achieved more constructive ideas from enthusiastic colleagues for the definition of a large class. Therefore, in the context of this paper, this meaning is adopted as a working

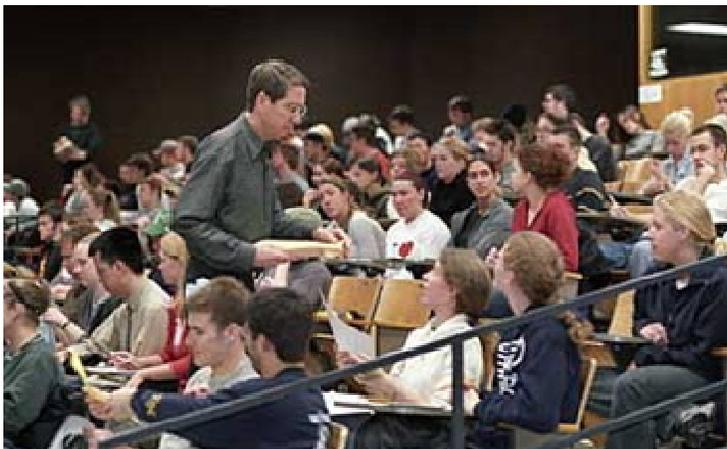
standard that sets the parameters of the discussion of the concept of a ‘large class’. Furthermore, the paper is based on the critical reflective practices and experiences as the author draws most of the evidence based on narrative practices and principles; especially, thanks to the two-week training course for Teachers Development provided by the University of Queensland, Australia and the Project 2020 of Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training in Can Tho City in April, 2015.

II. Contextual Background of large classes

Because of the enormously high demand of higher education and the worldwide phenomenon of educational expansion, large class sizes become a part of a teaching setup at the university especially at undergraduate level. Class size refers to the number of students in a given course or classroom, specifically either (1) the number of students being taught by individual teachers in a course or classroom or (2) the average number of students being taught by teachers in a school, district, or education system. (S. Abbott , 2014). It is difficult to make a definition of what a large class is. In some countries, a class with 30 students is not considered at all problematic. In other countries, however, such a class would be challenging for teachers. At the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, for English classes, some teachers have to face even more than 50 students (in some other Vietnamese schools, a class may include more students). This, according to research, poses challenges to both experienced and inexperienced educators who are assigned to teach larger classes (Lantz, Smith and Branney, 2008).

As pointed out in the preceding paragraph, the issue of large classes is not unique to the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, but is also found at other educational institutions in Vietnam as well as all over the world. It is believed that since the 1970's, class sizes in universities across the world have been increasing (Gibbs and Jenkins, 1992). Stanley and Porter (2002) note that, “large classes are very prevalent in many universities and are often gateway courses to students’ major fields of study (p.xxii).

Yet at most universities, introductory courses or classes that fulfill general education requirements often carry enrollment of hundreds of students. These large-class settings have historically been heavily lecture-centered, requiring minimal student engagement and expecting little more than memorization of terms and concepts as evidence of student learning. The sheer size and anonymity of large classes seem to militate against the very elements that promote students' involvement and intellectual development, learning, and success. Inattention or absence from class and mediocre student performance seem to be tolerated simply as unfortunate realities. (Macgregor, Cooper, Smith, and Robinson (2000, p.1))



The situation quoted above may create more challenges to both students and instructors and can consequently lead to less effective teaching and learning. Botha, Fourie and Gyser (2005, p. 63) observe and caution that:

Large classes are often cited as 'proof' that higher education institutions care more about generating income than educating students. Defenders of big classes have to acknowledge that these large classes can turn into big disasters. ... Too often, young and inexperienced lecturer [sic], who have not even had the time to frame their qualifications, are pushed in front of a sea of staring students, handed a piece of chalk, and told to teach them something.

The realities in some universities would be that reducing classes to a smaller number would not be economically viable in terms of the availability of human resources and teaching and learning facilities. With this condition, large classes will definitely continue to exist.

III. Definition of a large class

What constitutes a large class? It appears that there is not a commonly accepted definition of a large class in the literature but a considerable amount of literature has alluded to what could be viewed as large classes. For instance, a report from a workshop organized by the University of Queensland (April, 2015) focusing on teaching and learning in higher education held at Can Tho University in Can Tho city, Vietnam indicated that participants who are college and university teachers could not agree on a single definition of what a large class is. In their attempt to define a large class, they expressed the following understandings:

- There is nothing like a large class;
- The large class is only in the mind of the orthodox teacher;
- A large class is one with more students than available facilities can support;
- A large class has more than 100 students enrolled;
- There is no fixed number. The large class depends on the discipline- smaller number for engineering, science and medicine and large number for arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Ur (1996, p.302) specifically proposes that "the exact number does not really matter: what matters is how you, the teacher, see the class size in your own specific situation". This view is also supported by Baker and Westrup (2000, p.2) who suggest that "a large class can be any number of students, if the teacher feels there are too many students for them all to make progress". The same thinking is held by Todd (2006, p.1) who adds that "what is taught influences teachers' judgments of the size of classes" which later can influence their definition of a large class. Mulryan-Kyne (2010) offers a different view by arguing for the importance of taking into consideration the nature of the course and the resources and facilities available. For example, Mulryan-Kyne explains that "Meeting the needs of a class of 50 in a science laboratory designed for 30 is likely to be more challenging than

presenting a history lecture to 220 students in a lecture room designed for 200” (p. 176). However, Jungic and Kent (2006) further define large classes as classes with students above 200 in large university lecturing rooms.

From what has been presented so far, it becomes evident that the concept of large class size is subjective, largely contextualized and situational based. Therefore, a large class in the Western world can be a small class in Asia or vice versa due to the fact that the teaching contexts differ.

IV. Teaching Large Classes in Vietnam – English as a Foreign Language

Ever since the late 1990s when Vietnam opened up to the outside world, there has emerged a boom of learning English as foreign language in the whole country. The number of English learners in Vietnam has increased at an overwhelming speed with Vietnam’s entry into the WTO along with the rapid development of globalization and communication among all countries in the world. Thereafter, due to the lack of quality teachers and resources, the size of language class at any educational level tends to be larger and larger. It is very common for Vietnamese teachers either at primary or secondary schools to teach a class with more than 50 students and even not rare to have a college class with over 100 students especially since the expansion of college enrollment in 1990s. Teachers face many challenges teaching in large classes which can not be easily avoided in Vietnamese context, so much research has been conducted in such environment in order to facilitate teachers to cope with the problems arisen by the increase of the students in the classroom.

V. Disadvantages and Advantages of Teaching in Large Class.

There is no consensus when it comes to the effects of class size on students’ learning achievements, but many language teachers hold a negative view on teaching English in large classes. Often can we hear them say such words as “out of control”, “hard to organize class activities” or “impossible to communicate”. Similar worries are also shared by many researchers. Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) feel that it is difficult to control what happens when the number of group passes a certain number. Hayes (1997) thinks the ideal size of language class is 30 at most, because only such a scale can offer enough chances for the students to communicate with each other. According to many teachers’ views and complaints, Hayes classifies the problems associated with teaching in large classes into five categories: 1) Discomfort caused by the physical constraints; 2) Control problems (discipline aspects); 3) Lack of individual attentions; 4) Difficulty on evaluation; 5) Problems of charging learning effectiveness. These problems can be physical, psychological but to a great extent technical. Harmer (2000) also finds out in his study that large classes bring difficulties to both teachers and students and the process of teaching and learning. It is difficult for teachers to contact with the students sitting at the back or in the corners and for students to get the individual attention, and it is even impossible to organize dynamic and creative teaching and learning sessions. Most importantly, large classes are especially daunting for inexperienced teachers. This also indicates that teachers need more technical strategies in large class. Sharing with the earlier views, Locastro (2001) summarizes the problems of teaching large classes as pedagogical, management-related and affective. While large classes are not definitely a pedagogical disaster, the difficulties arising from large classes impose more requirements on language teachers compared with those teaching smaller classes.

From the late 20th century, the issues of handling large English classes also aroused the interest of teachers and researchers in Vietnam especially in higher education. Some researchers express concerns over the challenges encountered by the language teachers.

To summarize their points of view, for teaching large classes, it is difficult for teachers 1) to discipline the class, especially for primary and middle school students who lack self-control; 2) to satisfy all the needs of students who have different interests, personalities and capabilities; 3) to organize efficient class activities due to the constraints of time and space; 4) to provide equal chances for the students to participate and practice; 5) to give timely and effective feedback and evaluation.

But like some researchers such as Ur (2000) and Hess (2001), who argue that large classes can provide richer human resources and greater opportunities for creativity than smaller class, some researchers also identify some advantages of teaching large classes. They notice that more students mean more ideas, and hence more opinions and possibilities. It can be complemented three more advantages in detail by saying that large classes can provide more opportunities for co-students’ interaction, foster an atmosphere of cooperation and encourage

creativity and innovation. Therefore large classes bring not only challenges but also opportunities for teachers, as noted by Lewis and Woodward (1988), it is the teaching methodology rather than class size that contributes best to the efficacy of teaching. Such views encourage teachers to take adaptive teaching strategies to cope with the problems arising from the environment.

VI. Suggested principles and strategies for teaching large classes

These following ideas were dedicatedly discussed and drawn out by college and university teachers in certain workshops of two-week training course organized by the University of Queensland, Australia held at Can Tho University in Can Tho city in April, 2015. Besides, the constructive discussions and contributions from teachers' hands-on experience at the monthly seminar of the English Department, School of Foreign Languages, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh city in July, 2015 were deliberately noted down here for another trust-worthy reference.

<p>Affective</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) knowing the students well <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collecting personal information by use of students' portfolio; • asking students by their names to answer questions in class; 2) establishing good rapport with students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communicating with students frequently; • giving feedback in time; creating relaxed and unthreatening environment; 3) showing concern for both strong and weaker students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing equal chances by giving different tasks or assignments according to the students' levels; 4) arousing the students' interests <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enhancing expressive capability by talking humorously or exaggerating facial expression; • using different teaching means like pictures, music, movies etc; • carrying out various teaching activities such as games, role plays, and contests etc;
<p>Management-related</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) keeping the class disciplined <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lowering the voice if the class is too noisy; • moving around during class; • establishing class standard practice; 2) grouping students in multiple ways <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grouping students by interesting names; • grouping students with mixed abilities; 3) Marking homework assignment in different ways <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encouraging students to mark their assignments by themselves; • encouraging students to mark their assignments in groups; • choosing to mark students assignments randomly by teacher; • returning assignments by giving group feedback;

Pedagogical	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) establishing student-centered teaching philosophy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing more chances for students to participate through individual work, pair work, group work and whole class work • promoting learner autonomy by creating autonomous learning atmosphere and training students' learning strategies 2) changing traditional teaching mode <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting up different teaching objectives or assigning different homework for different levels of students • applying the communicative and task-based language teaching to increase students' use of language • organizing cooperative learning activities such as think-pair-share, three-step interview, and jigsaw to develop students' comprehensive language competence and cooperative skills • developing activity-based (especially group activity) language teaching 3) making use of modern teaching means <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using multimedia instruction; • using internet technique; 4) applying multi-evaluation system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • differentiating evaluation; • using both summative evaluation and formative evaluation; • combining teacher evaluation, peer evaluation and self-evaluation;
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VII. Conclusion

It can be clearly seen that a large class is a relative concept. Problems and difficulties of teaching associated with large classes can also be found in smaller classes. Teachers need to view large classes from a different perspective and recognize that despite a lot of disadvantages they can also provide many opportunities for teaching and learning methodologies, in which teachers can apply many experimental teaching styles to fit the students' various levels and personal styles. Class size is not the determining factor of teaching efficiency. Teachers need to enhance their innovative awareness and capabilities for developing effective ways for dealing with large classes based on the characteristics of large classes.

James Sturdevant writing in *College Composition and Communication* (1972) introduces a challenging future for teachers themselves to become proactive in regard to large class size: "... large group instruction is a certain reality of the near future - either we find ways to take advantages of the concept in ways acceptable to our own discipline, or we will find administrators, often lacking expertise in our area, quite willing to suggest how we should go about it."

To sum up, teachers should make more efforts to effectively face with the reality of large classes, so that optimal learning may take place. More importantly, the duty and the responsibility are on the teaching staff to provide quality instruction and guidance no matter what size the class.

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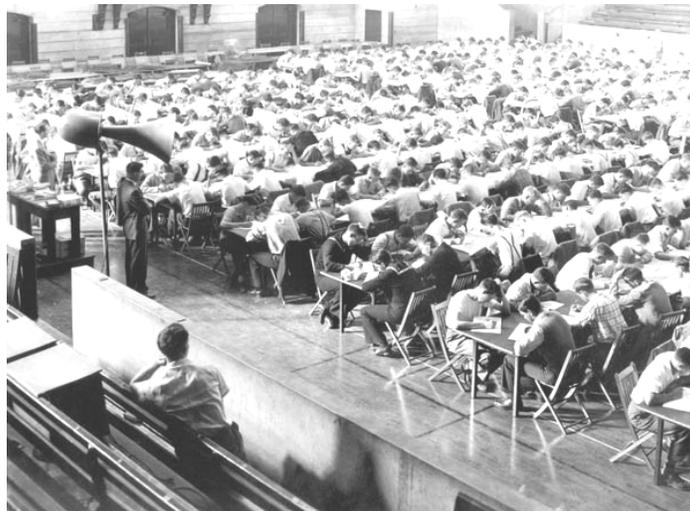
APPENDIX 1:

Activities for teaching English effectively in large classes, adopted from the two-week course in Teachers Professional Development, which was provided by the University of Queensland , Australia and the Project 2020 of Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training in April, 2015.

EMTP

Teaching English Effectively:
Strategies for Teaching Large Classes

Activities



A. WALL NEWSPAPER

AIM: Writing; cultivating pride in work; support for excellence

LEVEL: All levels

TIME: Varies

PREPARATION: Assign one wall in your classroom or in the hallway to be the Wall Newspaper. If possible, have it covered by a large bulletin board (which you can put pins in).

PROCEDURE:

1. Each time a writing project has been done in your class, randomly choose ten to fifteen papers that you will read over carefully.
2. Choose two of the most interesting from this group and edit them thoroughly.
3. Invite the two students whose papers you have chosen for a brief conference. Explain how or why you have edited their papers and ask if they want to change or add anything.
4. The chosen students re-write their papers and they are posted on the Wall Newspaper.
5. Leave the papers there for about ten days.

NOTE:

If the wall is placed in a conspicuous place in an entranceway, it makes an interesting display for visitors or students. Students enjoy seeing their work displayed and the Wall serves as a great motivator for writing excellence.



B. GIVE ME YOUR STICKS

AIM: Discussion; fluency practice; more even participation.

LEVEL: All levels

TIME: Varies

PREPARATION: Bring toothpicks to class – at least as many as five times the members of your class.

PROCEDURE:

1. Prior to any small group discussion, give each student five toothpicks.
2. Each time students speak up in a discussion, they place a toothpick in the centre.
3. During the discussion, all toothpicks should be used.
4. Once all toothpicks are used, students are not allowed to talk unless they get special permission from the facilitator.
5. When the group discussions over, ask “How many of you used all five toothpicks?”

Get a show of hands and say, “Great!” Then ask, “How many used four toothpicks?”

Again, get a show of hands and dole out praise.

Continue with three, and say “Good!” Let’s try for five next time”.



NOTE:

This activity ensures that over-participants don’t steal the show during group discussion and it encourages those who are shy to speak up. Using this frequently promotes even participation.

C. PICTURE IT

AIM: Learning names; fluency practice; creating a supportive environment

LEVEL: Intermediate-advanced

TIME: 15-20 minutes

PROCEDURE:

1. Students use large pieces of paper or stick several pieces of paper together. The paper serves as each student’s individual poster. If you have large poster paper available, use it. (See box below for examples.)
2. Students write their name in large letters on their poster and add a picture or mnemonic that will help the class remember his/her name in the target language.
3. In pairs, students explain their posters to each other.
4. Each pair joins another pair, and partners explain each other’s posters to the group of four.
5. Circulate and listen to name explanations, learning as many names as possible.
6. Students post their presentation posters around the room, where they stay posted for a period of time.

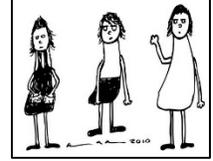
OPTIONAL FOLLOW -UPS:

- Each day 5-6 students explain their poster to the entire class.
- Each day 2-3 students explain the poster of a classmate whose mnemonic they remember well.

Examples of explanations:

My name is Won Ho. Please remember there is just *One Ho*. There are not two Ho's.

My name is Natalie. I have written it in three syllables. *Na ta lie*. That is because I have three sisters. I have drawn pictures of my three sisters.



My name is Saif. My name means sword. I have drawn a picture of a sword. The last part of my name is "if". Remember that **IF** I want to, I can cut things with the sword.

D. A RESOURCE FOR SELF-CORRECTION

AIM: Accuracy in writing

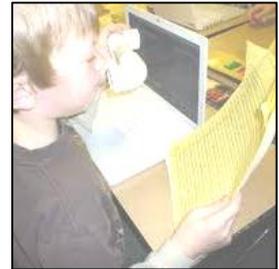
LEVEL: All levels

TIME: Varies

PREPARATION: From any writing handbook or grammar book that you like, choose ten of the writing rules that you feel your class needs the most. Periodically check the list and if you feel that your students have mastered any of the rules on the list, add and/or make changes. After each rule, write an example. Base the examples on the lives of the students in your class. (See box below for a suggested list.) Make several copies of the list.

PROCEDURE:

1. Post the rules in several different places.
2. After completing a piece of writing, students take it up to one of the lists to check their composition.
3. As students write, circulate, checking their writing.
4. On a post-it note, write the number of the rule that they should check and unobtrusively place it on students' papers.
5. As you correct compositions, you can also simply write the number of the rule when and where needed.



A suggested list of rules for an intermediate class.

1. Put a period at the end of a sentence. Example: *Kumiko loves cats.*
2. Start a new sentence with a capital letter. Example: *Her favourite cat is **B**ambo.*
3. Put a question mark at the end of a question. Example: *Does Ahmed like American movies?*
4. The first word after a question mark starts with a capital letter. Example: ***Y**es, Ahmed really loves American movies – especially those with Kevin Costner.*
5. A sentence must have a subject and a verb and be a complete thought. Example: ***Maria and Fabiowent** to a great party last weekend.*
6. Put a comma before the word 'and' in a compound sentence. Example: *We have studied English for six months, and we really feel that we have learned a lot.*
7. Use 'a' or 'an' with singular count nouns when we are not referring to a specific person or thing. Example: *Herman arrived in **a** big car and **a** girl smiled at him. She gave him **an** apple.*
8. Do not use 'a' or 'an' with a non-count noun. Example: *Sumi gave Theresa good advice.*
9. Use 'the' with nouns whose identity you know. Example: ***The** car that Herman arrived in was his father's.*

E. GROUP DICTATIONS

- AIM:** Writing; clear speech; listening; dictation practice; review or preview.
- LEVEL:** All levels
- TIME:** 15-20 minutes
- PREPARATION:** Find a suitable passage to be dictated. It may be a passage from a text you have recently studied, and thus it will serve as a review, or it may be a passage from a text that you will soon read, and thus will serve as a preview. The passage should not be longer than about half a page of text.

PROCEDURE:

1. Divide the class into groups of five.
2. Each group sends a *reader* to the front of the room.
3. Give each reader the passage to be dictated.
4. Groups send another student who meets the group reader. This student is the *messenger*.
5. The reader reads the first sentences to the group messenger. The messengers may ask for as many repetitions as they need. They can also ask for only half of the sentence. (But the reader is not allowed to show the text to the messenger.)
6. The messenger returns to the group and dictates what (s)he heard while the group members write. They may ask for repetitions as many times as they wish.
7. When you notice fatigue on the part of the messengers, call "CHANGE". This will be a signal for groups to send new messengers. The former messengers will join the groups and continue the dictation of the previous writers.
8. Do several *CHANGES*.
9. When one group is finished with the entire passage, declare that group the winner.
10. Give each group the entire passage and allow some time for them to check their work.
11. Ask for a correct reading of the entire passage.

F. MUTUAL INTERVIEWS

- AIM:** Getting acquainted; fluency practice; listening; speaking.
- LEVEL:** Intermediate-advanced
- TIME:** 20-30 minutes
- PREPARATION:** Prepare an interview suitable to your students or use one of those provided (see the box below for examples).

PROCEDURE:

1. Make sure students know what an interview is (a guided conversation).
2. Talk with your students about when and why interviews are used (radio, television, newspaper, before jobs etc).
3. Students sit in pairs facing each other.



4. They take turns interviewing each other. They are not to take notes; they are only to listen carefully.
5. Each pair joins another pair, and each interviewer introduces his/her partner to the foursome.
6. Volunteers introduce their partners to the entire class.

Examples of interviews:

Initial interview

- Tell me about your family.
- Can you tell me why it is important for you to learn English.
- Please tell me about a future plan.
- What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?
- Please tell me about your city or neighbourhood.

Later interview

- Please tell me about a dream you often have.
- Could you tell me about something you are proud of?
- Tell me about a hope you have for the next five years.
- Please tell me about something you believe in.
- What would you do if you had a lot of money and had to spend it on yourself?
- Is there a book or a film that has made an impression on you?
- Tell me about a person you admire.

VARIATIONS:

1. You can turn this exercise into a writing activity by having students take notes and later write a story about the person they have interviewed.
2. Interviews can be constructed around any interesting reading passage the students might have done.

G. PEER REVIEWS

AIM: Writing; listening; reading

LEVEL: All levels

TIME: 30-45 minutes

PREPARATION: Prepare a peer review form. (See example in the box below). Make, or ask students to make, two copies of their compositions. They then each have three copies of their compositions.

PROCEDURE:

1. In groups of three, students give each group member a copy of their composition.
2. From a central place in the room, each group takes 6 review sheets (2 for each group member).
3. Explain the difference between being a **Reviewer** (who reads content) and an **Editor** (who reads for structure and grammar).
4. The first student in each group reads his/her composition out loud while his/her groupmates follow along. They can make comments or ask questions during the reading.
5. At the completion of the reading, each student fills out the reviewer/editor form.
6. The process is repeated with each student.
7. Students receive their peer review/edit forms and read the comments of classmates. They may wish to ask questions for clarification.
8. Students re-write compositions making appropriate additions and changes.
9. The compositions are filed in the students' personal writing folder.
- 10.



Peer Review Form

Today's date: -----

Writer's name: -----

Reviewer/editor's name: -----

The reviewer:

One thing I liked in _____'s paper was _____.

I also liked _____.

My questions about the paper are: _____.

I didn't understand _____.

I would like more _____.

The editor:

I think that the writer should correct _____.

NOTE:

As an alternative to providing reviewer/editor forms, you can simply write the information on the board and ask the students to copy on a piece of paper.

H. THE QUIET SIGNAL

AIM: Organisation; listening to directions; fluency practice.

LEVEL: All levels

TIME: 10-15 minutes

PREPARATION: Decide on what your quiet signal (the signal for students to stop the group task and wait quietly) will be. (See box 2 below for suggestions.)

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students that since language demands a lot of practice, much time in class will be spent on talking in pairs and in small groups. To do this successfully it is very important that everyone knows just when an activity starts, what everyone is supposed to do, and when an activity ends. This is why you will establish, and stick with, a certain quiet signal that everyone must know and recognise.
2. Show the class the quiet signal and tell them that you will spend some time practising it.
3. Assign students a topic to talk about in pairs. (See box 1 below for suggestions.)
4. In pairs, students talk until the conversation seems animated and lively.
5. Use the quiet signal and time how long it takes the class to become quiet.
6. Say, "Congratulations students. That only took you ...minutes. But since we will have to do this many times during each lesson, I want it to go even faster. Let's see if we can practice one more time, and make the quiet signal work very, very quickly."
7. Repeat the procedure with another topic.
8. Again, congratulate the students and if you feel that it is necessary, repeat one more time.



Suggestions for pair talk	Suggestions for quiet signals
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• My favourite vacation• Wedding ceremonies• A film I enjoyed• My favourite restaurant• What I like to do on weekends••	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clapping• Raising your hand• Playing music• Playing a musical instrument (e.g. triangle, bongos)•••

I. NAMES AS CROSSWORDS

AIM: Learning names; practicing letter formation

LEVEL: Intermediate-advanced

TIME: 10-15 minutes

PROCEDURE:

1. Several students print their names in large clear letters on the board.
2. Other students write in their names as a crossword formation starting with a letter that appears in any name on the board, or they write their names across any of the names using any letter that already appears.
3. As more names appear, more and more letters will be available until all the names appear on the board. (See box below for an example.)
4. Students volunteer to read all the names in the name cluster where their own names appear. As they read the names they identify the students who are called by those names.

Example of name cluster

R U T H
A
M I
M A R G A R E T
Y I O
S B S
B E L L E
R R
T G
E

VARIATION

Start with only one name; inevitably sooner or later all the students will be able to add their names, producing one big cluster. The activity thus promotes class solidarity as students will identify with those classmates whose names cross their own.

VARIATION?

Could this be done with:

- subject specific words?
- academic language?

