

TEACHING LARGE MULTILEVEL CLASSES AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS HOCHIMINH CITY (UEH)

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Abstract

Large multilevel classes are very common in our educational system. The number of students studying English has increased rapidly recently. Because there are limited resources for teaching and a shortage of teachers of English, the size of English class tends to be larger and larger. Teachers cannot solve problems about large classes; however, a lot of researches on how to teach large multilevel classes have been conducted in order to help teachers manage their classes more efficiently and overcome difficulties and challenges. This paper is intended to summarise Hess's eleven principles (2001) to help teachers facing large multilevel classes. It also describes a sample reading lesson in which the teachers apply these principles to their teaching.

1. Introduction

In UEH, teachers of English always have to teach large multilevel classes even though students do placement tests before studying English. There are about fifty students in the English class and the number of periods of their four stages is only 180; therefore, class time is brief and precious. However, teachers have to deal with a lot of unexpected situations relating to large multilevel classes such as some students make a noise, some are reluctant to participate in class activities or even others text messages for their friends. Such behaviors make teachers frustrated and demotivated, and sometimes they do not know if their teaching methods are attractive and suitable to students' different levels.

Eleven principles of coping in large multilevel classes are very useful for the teachers who are responsible for large multilevel classes and they can help teachers manage their classes efficiently and overcome frustrations and fatigue easily.

2. Definition of a large multilevel class

According to Ur (1996), 40-50 students form a large class; whereas, Baker and Westrup (2002) state 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".

However, Treko (2013) thinks that teachers must concentrate not only on the number of students, but also on the different levels of students. Hess (2001) defines 'a large class as thirty or more' in her book. Hess points out that teachers often see the difference between students who speak fluently but inaccurately and those who are very good at reading and writing but cannot speak accurately. Beside the difference in language ability, according to Taylor Marcia (2005), students also differ in educational background, expectations of classroom activities, personality and learning styles.

3. Eleven principles of coping in large multilevel classes

Principle one: Scarlett O'Hara

Scarlet O'Hara is the main character in 'Gone with the Wind' written by Margaret Mitchell. She always said: "*I will think about it tomorrow*" when facing difficulties. Her spirit can help teachers deal with their exhaustion. Teachers can change their teaching methods, techniques, strategies in order that

students can feel more motivated in the class and find fun in their learning. Therefore, the Scarlet O'Hara's philosophy is a good principle.

Principle two: Variety

Students have different learning styles and strategies, so variety is essential in the teaching method; especially for large classes. This requires teachers to diversify their teaching by offering students different tasks, activities and techniques that can satisfy different levels in the class.

Students will not concentrate on class activities if teachers do not know how to attract them. Variety can give interest to large groups of students. Teachers must change their teaching way to satisfy students' needs. Variety also motivates passive students and helps teachers control their classes better.

Principle three: Pace

The speed of teaching is very important. When giving tasks to students, teachers have to give them enough time to complete. Hess (2001) writes: "Doing an activity too fast or too slow can ruin the process".

Teachers with their experience of teaching can estimate the speed and time for each task. Not all classes have the same speed because each class requires different paces. Therefore, teachers have to observe their classes carefully in order to set the appropriate pace for their students.

Principle four: Interest

If students do not find fun and interest in their English learning, it is easy for them to feel bored and avoid joining class activities. Topics or tasks have to be relevant to their interest. Hess suggests three basic characteristic aspects of topics that can attract students' interest. They are:

- *arouse student curiosity*
- *tap into meaning existential questions*
- *touch students' lives*

When students find fun and interest in their activities or tasks, the class management is easier and better.

Principle five: Collaboration

Hess (2001) states, "collaboration means working together and cooperating". Students can engage in class activities more if they have opportunities to cooperate with their classmates, share their ideas, and solve problems in pairs or groups. . In addition, collaboration can help passive students to join class activities efficiently. Through collaboration, students can take risks, monitor and evaluate themselves. As a results, their self-esteem can be developed.

Collaboration makes students more involved in learning process and more helpful through peer and self-correction.

Principle six: Individualization

In large classes, it is difficult for teachers to realize who the best student is; therefore, individualizing students helps teachers find the most outstanding student. Besides, the tasks given to students are challenging and interesting, are not too difficult or too easy. All students are given tasks and they can work at their own pace, in their own styles, and they can choose topics for themselves.

Principle seven: Personalization

Students are unique and different from each other. Therefore in large classes, students are given opportunities to express themselves such as they can share their views, talk about their future intentions, give presentations about their favourite topics, their dreams and their hopes or talk about a person they admire.

Principle eight: Choice and open-endedness

There are many types of tasks in the class; however, students are more interested in open-ended tasks because they can have opportunities to use their own language and complete the tasks based on their own level of language ability.

Open-endedness is very useful for promoting students' interest.

Principle nine: Setting up routines

Students are different from personalities and learning styles. Therefore, establishing appropriate routines helps both teachers and students feel comfortable and stable.

Routines are plans that guide teachers and students fulfill the tasks, but routines are not always fixed, they can be adjusted, refined or rejected as long as both teachers and students feel comfortable and confident.

Setting up routines helps teachers to deal with many management problems better.

Principle ten: Enlarging the circle

The purpose of this principle is to attract students to participate in class activities as many as possible. In large multilevel classes, teachers need to create learning atmosphere in which students have opportunities to use their language.

Principle eleven: Question the kind of questioning we use

In the large multilevel class, asking appropriate questions that draws students' interest and maximizing student involvement are very essential.

The questions that require students' attractive responses are:

- *Questions that begin with Why*
- *Requests that begin with 'Could someone explain to me how...'*
- *Questions to which the teacher doesn't know the answer.*
- *Requests that ask for clarification and elaboration and start with 'Could you please explain that' or 'Could you clarify what you mean.'*
- *Questions initiated by students and moved on to the whole class by the teacher.*

4. A sample reading lesson

A reading passage "Be aware of your online image" is from Unit 1, Pre-intermediate Market Leader.

Activities suggested:

Pre-reading activities:

- The teacher writes new words on the board, a good student can be called to explain them such as: *facebook profile, online image, online reputation, personal brand* or students can discuss new words in pairs; in this way students can help each other explore the meaning of new words.
- Students are asked to work in groups to answer some questions:
 1. *What social-networking sites do you a) know, and b) use?*
 2. *Why do you use them?*
 3. *Give advantages and disadvantages of social networking sites.*

During reading activities:

- The teacher gives students some minutes to scan the article to get its main idea individually. Topic sentences of the paragraphs are important for students to get the idea quickly.
- Students are asked to answer the questions after reading:
 1. *What percentage of employers research candidates online?*
 2. *Which social-networking sites are mentioned?*
 3. *Who do Peter Cullen and Farhan Yasin work for?*

and then compare their answers with their partners.

- In order to help students to be closer to the main ideas, the teacher can require students to read the article carefully and help them with the explanation of new words, new grammar or encourage them to guess the meaning of new vocabulary based on the context, grammar or parts of speech. Students can help each other to analyze the meaning of new words.
- Students are required to work in pairs to write a short list of things they should not do on their social networking pages. After that they can share ideas with the whole class and find if everyone has the same idea.
- Students can work in groups of three or four to discuss the question '*Should staff be allowed to use social-networking sites during the working day?*' After the discussion, each group can choose one student to share the group idea with other groups.

After reading activities:

- The teacher can ask students to summarize the article. This activity can be done individually.
- Students are encouraged to raise questions about social networking sites in which they are interested.

These activities are suitable with most of the above principles. For example:

- Principle 2 (variety) states that it is necessary to offer students different tasks because students have different learning styles. There are a lot of tasks given to students such as discussing questions, guessing the meaning of new words or summarizing the article.
- Principle 4 (Interest) shows that topics should be relevant to students' interest and touch their lives. As we can see, students have been very familiar with social network these days and they

use social media every day. Therefore, this topic is close to their lives and they can find fun and interest in these class activities.

- According to Principle five (collaboration), students can participate in activities by cooperating with their classmates to share their opinions, students can enhance their confidence and develop their self-esteem when stating their ideas in front of the class.
- Principle six (individualization) which can help teacher to identify who are the best. The summarizing task in the after reading part can help the teacher about this.
- Principle seven (personalization) helps students express themselves. They discuss a short list of things they should not do on their social networking pages. They can express their ideas, behaviors or the way to deal with social networking sites.
- Principle eight (choice and open-endedness) gives students more freedom to share their opinions. They can use their own language to discuss their opinions about the advantages or disadvantages of social media, to give the reason why they use social media in the pre-reading part. This can develop their ability to use English.
- Principle ten (enlarging the circle) brings students opportunities to join the class activities. Different tasks involve as many students as possible; as a result, many of the problems connected to class control and interest can be avoided.
- Principle eleven (question the kind of questioning we use) suggests different kinds of questions. There are many kinds of questions such as why, what, yes-no questions or requests. These kinds of questions can motivate students and attract them to be involved in activities and they do not feel bored.
- Some of above suggested activities are designed based on Hess's principles with the hope that they can help teachers of English manage their classes more easily and efficiently.

5. Conclusion

Teaching large multilevel classes has caused pressure and stress to teachers of English. They may deal with a lot of challenges in teaching large multilevel classes which cannot be avoided in our educational environment. Fortunately, many researchers and experts are interested in how to cope with large multilevel classes and give useful advice to teachers of English. The above eleven principles proposed by Hess help teachers to face difficulties and find interest in their teaching occupation.

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