

THE NEGLECTED EXTREME--THE VERY SMALL CLASS

Beverly Ingram
 Jean Pender
 Instituto Anglo-Mexicano
 de Cultura
 Guadalajara

Class of sixty? Everyone agrees without reservation that such large groups are an EFL teacher's nightmare, and at least some attention is directed in teacher's courses and texts to techniques for dealing with them. Class of one? The facile corollary is that it must be a teacher's dream. It seems such an easy-to-handle situation that it is rarely, if ever, mentioned in a teacher's preparation. Teachers' courses quite logically emphasize techniques for working with classes of 25-30 students because most teacher's courses are connected in some way to an institution or system in which classes of this size are considered the norm. Yet the class of one, like the class of sixty, is remarkably different from the class of twenty-five. Doesn't it deserve some mention in the basic training course?

Very small classes are certainly common enough to merit attention. One could safely say that a significant minority of EFL teaching in Mexico and around the world takes place in very small or private classes.¹ Many EFL teachers, especially at the beginning of their careers, find themselves teaching classes of one or two students to survive financially while waiting to become regular staff members of an institution or to supplement their low starting incomes. They may be teaching private classes while still taking a teacher-training course. The classes might even

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1. Even though the common term "private class" usually implies a financial arrangement between individuals as well as small size, we will use "private class" and "very small class" interchangeably to refer only to size. Thus, "private class" in this paper will mean a class in which one, two or possibly three students have a teacher "private" to themselves regardless of how payment is made, whether directly to the teacher or through an institution.

be part of the training course itself. (In such cases a teacher-in-training is assigned a tutoring task to give him some contact with the practical side of teaching so that he can put the theoretical side in better perspective.) Even a teacher who never ventures into setting up his own classes will probably teach more than one private class during his career within the framework of an institution. For example, advanced classes are not infrequently very small; at certain holiday times, regular classes unexpectedly turn into private classes. An institute may contract to set up private classes for a company, may organize a remedial class for an individual who simply cannot succeed in regular classes, or may specialize exclusively in very small classes.

Essentially, almost every teacher will teach a very small class at one time or another. It makes sense, then, to include a brief unit on the teaching of the very small class early in a teacher's preparation; "early" because he is quite likely to teach private classes at the beginning of his career. Of course, some of the points in such a unit would be merely applied common sense, but simple awareness of certain pitfalls beforehand would help the starting teacher to avoid problems from the beginning. Let's look now at three essential topics in a possible unit on the very small class: Surveying the Students (a quick introduction) Setting up the Class, and Teaching the Class (Techniques).

SURVEYING THE STUDENTS (A QUICK INTRODUCTION)

Since very small classes usually cost more than larger classes, the students are limited in a general way to those who can afford the luxury of a private teacher.² A student may

2. In this section, as in the entire paper, we will concern ourselves only with adult students, not with children.

even choose a very small class strictly because it is more expensive; he wants and is willing to pay for the status, the exclusiveness, of a very small class. Some students must take private classes for flexibility and convenience. A businessman may not have time to go to a regular class or may not be free to attend at the scheduled hours. He arranges for a teacher to come to him at his own convenience. A housewife who may not be allowed or able to leave her home has a teacher come to her. Other students in very small classes genuinely do not like to study in groups or even fear competition from other students or the pressure inherent in a structured system involving tests and promotions. Another group of students who might ordinarily consider private classes too costly may justify the expense for a limited time to prepare for a short-term goal such as a standardized test, trip or conference.

SETTING UP THE CLASS

It is worthwhile organizing small classes carefully. What look like minor details may in fact be the key to a successful class.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

If the payment for a small class is to be made directly by the student to the teacher, it is absolutely necessary that the amount and timing of payment be clearly agreed on before the first lesson is given; otherwise, the teacher may find he is in the embarrassing position of having to remind the student about payment or even discover he has been teaching for free.

The most satisfactory arrangement is payment in advance on a monthly basis. It should be made clear to the student that unless he gives at least a week's notice, he will have to pay for the lesson he misses. Most language schools, after all,

charge a set fee at the beginning of a course and do not make allowances for lessons missed.

The price of the class should be determined by its length and the number of students. The price should not be far above or below what is locally charged. (Students often compare prices.) In the price the time and cost of travelling should be considered. A one-hour class could take up to two and a half hours of a teacher's time.

Two special situations in which small classes sometimes occur don't involve direct payment. In the first, English lessons are traded for Spanish -- this can work; however, it probably won't if one person is a much more competent language teacher than the other or is proficient enough in his partner's language to be tempted to use it in explanations instead of using the target language. Similarly a trade of food and board in return for language lessons is also often unsatisfactory as the guest may well not want to "teach" English twenty-four hours a day while the hosts may feel they are being cheated if their guest starts to speak their native language.

LENGTH AND FREQUENCY OF CLASSES

If there is only one student, it is difficult for a teacher or student to sustain more than a one hour class, mainly because the situation puts considerable pressure on both the teacher and the learner. Even if the class has a break, the teacher and student are still together. A cup of coffee does not change the situation.

Once the length of the class has been agreed on the teacher and student should be careful to keep to it. It is useful to decide if there will be a break in the class, how long it will be and whether to include it in the class length; otherwise, the class may turn out to be longer than the teacher or student really wants. Punctuality is very important. If ending the lesson becomes a problem, "invent" another lesson so you must always leave by a certain time.

The number of classes per week depends on the student, but often students are rather over-ambitious and feel they can maintain a pace of study, say, a lesson every day, which often they can't manage. Unless the student has a very definite short-term goal, i. e. an examination or a trip coming up, he is unlikely

to be able to handle more than three lessons a week, and the teacher may need at the outset to convince him of this.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Since private classes are not generally held in a school, it is important that the teacher create an atmosphere which is suitable for the English class. In a classroom there is a natural assumption by students and teacher that the teacher is in control of the situation, but this may well not be the case in the private class.

If the class is for a businessman in his office, make sure that he is not sitting at his desk (where he is in command). Also, if in the first lessons he is constantly being interrupted by phone calls, messages and so on, protest and try to move the class to a different room. If the class is in a private house, don't try to give it sitting in comfortable armchairs balancing books on knees. If the class happens to be a small class in a regular classroom, do not isolate two students in a sea of desks and stand by the blackboard separated from them. The ideal situation for the small class seems to be for teacher and students to be seated around a table (dining size or smaller -- avoid tables which are too low to write on) on hard-backed chairs.

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

A very small class appears to be an ideal way of helping a language learner improve his performance, but ironically for most students and teachers it is one of the most difficult classes to handle. There are several pitfalls which will no doubt be familiar to teachers with a lot of experience in private teaching.

Often family members wish to study together-- husband with wife or children with parents; these combinations rarely make a successful class. It is highly artificial for people who are used to communicating closely and constantly in one language to switch and try to communicate in a foreign language. Also when the relationship between the students is intimate, the usual teacher/student dynamics are upset. This can also happen if close friends study together in a small class. Problems can arise too when people working directly together, for example a boss and his secretary, study together. This relationship is too important not to interfere in the class. Small groups in companies, however, can make very good classes when those studying together work in different departments, although they

are employed by the same company.

Since the very small class is much more intimate than the normal one, sometimes a student may want the teacher to be a shoulder-to-cry-on or a father confessor or even a romantic attachment. Any or all of these possibilities can probably be avoided if the teacher keeps a business-like attitude towards the class. However, if both teacher and student are content to allow one of the above-mentioned relationships to develop, they should not fool themselves that the object of the class is to learn English. A variation of this pitfall usually happens to only the foreign teacher. When learning English is the fashionable thing to do, for some having a "foreign teacher" is merely a status symbol. It can be very annoying for a teacher when he realizes that the student has little real interest in learning.

A major problem in small classes is that it is all too easy for the teacher or the student to become lazy. Once in a while, it is nice to sit and have a chat session, but it should not become the regular pattern for the class. Chatting should not be used as a way out for the teacher who comes ill-prepared or by the student as a means of diverting the teacher from his plan. When a teacher has twenty-five students, a syllabus to cover and a supervisor checking on him and a student has the pressure of other classmates who are anxious to learn, giving in to laziness is less likely.

Something that needs careful handling in a small class is the element of competition. While competition can be used to advantage in a big class, with only two or three students it can lead to rivalry and bad feeling and spoil a class.

Lastly, a teacher who is used to big groups must be careful to change his techniques when handling only one or two students or he may simply put too much pressure on them, making them feel very uncomfortable.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

Before he starts classes a teacher must get an idea of the student's level of English. He should tape record a conversation to discover the standard of oral production, give both listening and reading comprehension tests and a piece of free writing-- this writing could well be about the student himself, his interests and so on. He must also find out why the student wishes to learn, what he expects to get out of the classes and how long he thinks it will take to accomplish his goals. With this

information the student and teacher can work together to map out a suitable course of study.

Sometimes it may be necessary through discussion to alter some of the student's goals if they are unrealistic or to point out that in a small class to concentrate on only one skill may not prove very satisfactory because the class will lack variety. If the student plans to go to a particular country or take a special exam this, together with the student's interests, will affect the choice of a textbook.

TEACHING THE CLASS (TECHNIQUES)

ABSENCE OF A GROUP

The techniques an EFL teacher practices for the classroom presuppose a group. The techniques he must master are aimed at giving individuals as much practice as possible within the group as a whole by creating and channeling interaction between students. In training courses teachers are cautioned to reduce teacher-talking-time. Teachers learn to organize pair work, small group work, and student-to-student question and answer practice. Teachers are admonished to involve everyone and to distribute their attention evenly, but to take advantage of peer teaching and correction as well. Teachers are taught to consider in class only those questions from individuals which would benefit the class as a whole. With experience teachers find out which students can handle the pressure of being called on first. Teachers become sensitive to the amount of pressure an individual student can tolerate on a given day; if John is feeling down and unresponsive today, he can be called on less frequently than usual while Bert, who's feeling great, can take up the slack. In short, a great part of the perfection of the teacher's craft is making second nature the smooth management of a group. But in the very small class there is no group. To be effective the teacher must rethink the strategies and adjust the techniques he relies on in the more usual classroom situation.

AIDS

In addition, the teacher must look at his aids with the very small class in mind. Flashcards are more portable than a favorite wall chart, which causes no trouble on a trip down the

corridor but creates chaos on a crowded bus across town. In many places where very small classes are held, the teacher's most relied-upon aid, the blackboard, which is used so naturally and often that it seems an extension of the teacher himself, is absent. A workable alternative in the very small class is a large pad and a felt-tipped pen in a clear colour (not a marker, which would be too unwieldy). The felt-tipped pen can be seen more easily than a ball-point pen or pencil. In presentation the teacher can work with pad/pen much as he would with a blackboard, with the same attention to effective visual organization of the material. At the end of the session the teacher may give the student the pages from the pad for future reference and study. Some teachers prefer, however, that a student make his own notes because in doing so he must concentrate more and begins to assimilate the material. The big pad is doubly important with two students because two people, besides the teacher, need a clear view. In work with two students the teacher would probably choose to have each student make his own notes to avoid the question of who gets the presentation notes this time.

A useful, versatile aid for a very small class is a cassette recorder/player. We will recommend the use of a cassette machine several times in our comments on the teaching of listening and speaking. In fact, we can think of no better purchase for a teacher headed abroad to teach than a cassette recorder/player of his own, hopefully one of good enough quality to be workable in a classroom as well as in very small classes.

WHAT ALL STUDENTS NEED

Until now we have emphasized the differences between the very small class and other types of classes. Nevertheless, students have some things in common, regardless of the size of the class they are in. Whether in a class of one, twenty-five or sixty, a student needs a goal or sense of purpose, a feeling of accomplishment and some amount of variety in his learning activities.

Goals and accomplishment go hand-in-hand since a feeling of accomplishment results from the meeting of a goal. Thus, even though a teacher may determine that bits and pieces of work from here and there will meet his student's specific needs better than any one textbook, the teacher may well ask the student to buy a book anyway. The teacher will supplement the book with other material, but progress through the book gives the student a tangible marker of what he has done. An alter-

native solution, especially for intermediate and advanced conversation, is the development with the student of a list of topics. Both teacher and student have a copy of the list and consistently check off a topic once it has been covered and decide mutually on the next topic to be undertaken. The list serves as a marker of progress.

Variety is necessary to stimulate interest and to counteract fatigue on both the part of student and teacher. Fatigue is, oddly enough, more difficult to avoid and to hide in the very small class than in a large one. A well-placed change of pace is just as effective with one student as with a dozen or several dozen. While most games seem inappropriate for the class of one, the teacher can plan to follow a period of intense oral practice with a more "relaxing" activity such as a reading comprehension exercise or a taped listening comprehension exercise, taped dictation or song on tape. The printed material or the recorded selection becomes the focal point and relieves the pressure of continual T-to-S, S-to-T interaction. Notice that the terms "plan" and "well-placed activities" have been used here. For the class of one, as for any class, the teacher needs to spend some time considering, not only what he is going to do, but how he will sequence it. Furthermore, a plan gives the teacher a sense of purpose of his own that helps both he and the student overcome the tendency to drift into the mutual lethargy mentioned earlier.

LISTENING

Listening is the indispensable partner of speaking in the "conversation" skill that is the primary goal of many students in very small classes; its development deserves strategic attention. The chatty teacher who fills up the class with stream-of-consciousness patter which requires no active participation or follow-up by the student is hardly giving strategic attention. The chatty student who simply wants a listening ear in whatever language should be convinced by the teacher that his fluency in speaking will be quite handicapped unless his listening is equally "fluent". Such a student must have rather formal listening exercises to force him to give listening a chance to grow.

In some cases listening can be a rather difficult skill to work with in a one-to-one situation. Try reading a listening comprehension passage to one person. It may be difficult to maintain the eye contact that usually accompanies a lively interesting reading of the passage while maintaining the concen-

tration necessary for comprehension and retention. Both teacher and student may feel embarrassed, uncomfortable or simply break into laughter and abandon the task. The awkwardness can be avoided easily enough if the student has something to look at, such as a set of pre-questions or a picture related to the reading. If a recording is being used, the tape recorder becomes the focal point. It offers other advantages as well. The student can't ask the recorder to repeat or slow down; he gets practice for telephone conversations and, if the teacher has had another speaker make the recording, exposure to a different voice. While the student listens, the teacher can check a piece of homework or a composition or make notes to plan the next class.

If a student can afford one-to-one classes, he might be able to buy a cassette player and the two blank cassettes necessary for a teacher-student exchange system. The teacher prepares exercises on one cassette which is given to the student in exchange for the other cassette. Thus, the teacher always has one cassette and the student has the other. Since very small classes, as we pointed out earlier, don't ordinarily meet more than two or three times a week, selections recorded for homework (exercises, readings, dictations) provide contact with spoken English between classes. A student who hardly does homework for regular classes and who certainly won't do it for a private class seems somewhat more enthusiastic about homework on tape, even if he only follows along in a book as he listens to a reading.

Extensive information on how to teach listening comprehension is readily available in methodology texts, articles and workshops. We will refer the teacher to those resources for help with technique and mention only one type of exercise here. The teacher records a short but challenging dictation passage, a text, as follows: 1) Listen only. Do not write, (followed by a reading of the complete text at normal speed); 2) Now, listen and write (a reading of the text phrase by phrase with enough time left between phrases for the student to write); 3) You now have a minute(s) to check your work (the period of silence is included on the recording); 4) Listen again and check your work (a reading of the text at slightly less than normal speed with somewhat longer-than-usual pauses between sentences). The student first tries the given dictation exercise, Form A, during a class meeting. As soon as he finishes, the teacher gives him a correct copy of the recorded text to compare with what he has written. The student takes the correct copy and the cassette for home study for a set period of time, two days, four days, a week. He is assigned to listen to the text and read along until he feels fairly confident about writing it. Then, he practices

writing from the taped dictation. Afterwards, he checks what he has written against the correct copy. When the study period is over, the student again writes the dictation in class, but this time he writes Form B, which the teacher immediately corrects. The format of the second recording is the same as the first, but the passage itself has been reworked. The content words are the same, but they have been reshuffled. Material that came at the beginning in Form A may come at the end in Form B. What appeared as a statement in Form A may appear as a question in Form B. Here is an example:

Form A

Japan is a mysterious country for foreigners. For over 300 years it was isolated from the rest of the world. This was a deliberate policy carried out by the Shoguns, rulers of Japan. Such isolation meant that the Japanese developed as a very homogeneous race. There was no inter-marriage with other races.

Form B

Why is Japan a mysterious country for foreigners?
For 300 years the rulers of Japan, the Shoguns, carried out a deliberate policy of isolation from the rest of the world. The Japanese developed as a very homogeneous race because there was no inter-marriage with other races.

Because Form B is a variation of Form A, the exercise requires more than just memory work. On the other hand, the body of language the student must deal with is limited enough to ensure him a measure of success if he has prepared. The passage should include new, useful vocabulary and perhaps even a new or difficult grammar item. By the time the student has finished practicing with the passage, he will have learned the vocabulary and become quite familiar with the grammar. The teacher may want to collect the student's first attempts over a period of time in order to follow his progress in coping with an unknown passage.

SPEAKING

In a big group the formula "let's just talk" is effective only once in a while, and the same is true in a very small class.

Eventually, the hoped-for conversation becomes at best a question-answer session in which the teacher fires question after question over the last vacation and yesterday's activities. Outside the classroom such one-sided questioning interactions seem limited to initial social encounters and job interviews.

Role play is one way to stimulate more natural conversation. The teacher can take the roles of the managers, secretaries, clerks and phone operators that the student will have to deal with in an English-speaking country. In this way the student will be playing his natural role and will not waste time practicing language he will never really use. The teacher and student can take the roles of people in a picture, whether from a magazine or from a book like What do you think? (Byrne & Wright, Longman). Before taking part in a conversation suggested by a picture, they can discuss the picture itself through questions posed, sometimes by the teacher, and sometimes by the student.

Almost any picture, whether suitable for role play work or not, can encourage a lot of talk. Students can produce stories and descriptions about the picture or ask questions about it. Beginning students who are capable of only very limited narratives and descriptions can nevertheless answer and ASK, quite creatively, a sizeable number of questions about a picture. Since only one student has to see the picture, the teacher isn't restricted to large, clear visuals; he can use small, detailed pictures as well and ask the student to bring in personal photos to talk about, too.

During conversations in which the teacher takes an active part, the cassette recorder is again a valuable tool. Although it is possible for the teacher to participate in a conversation and simultaneously monitor the student's errors, it is not easy. He can rarely give sufficient attention to either task and has trouble remembering specific errors without making notes, which distracts and sometimes demoralizes the student who may panic whenever he sees the teacher scribbling away. If the conversation has been recorded, the teacher and student can play it back and go over the mistakes with an attention to the student's individual problems which is not possible in the normal classroom. Surely this is the kind of help that the student is hoping for when he decides to take a very small class.

A text can be used as the basis for oral work in a very small class, but it can be used in an additional, more-detailed way that is not recommended for larger classes. When working

with only one student the teacher can profitably afford to spend time answering the student's questions about words or expressions he doesn't understand. The teacher through further examples and questions can lead the student conversationally to active use of the expression if it seems worthwhile enough for the student to acquire and reuse. Readers, collections of anecdotes such as Elementary Stories for Reproduction (Hill, Oxford U.P.), general texts, magazines, newspapers and special texts to promote conversation such as I Think, You Think (Alexander & Kingsbury, Longman) are possible sources of texts to use in oral work. The student himself might bring a text he would like to talk about or a travel brochure or advertisement.

Work with pronunciation is a part of working with speaking. The emphasis it receives depends on the student's goals and whether or not his pronunciation causes serious problems for the listener. In larger classes pronunciation practice is usually handled in chorus at first to give everyone a chance to practice without individual pressure and gain confidence. In a very small class, of course, the student must perform individually at all stages in pronunciation practice with no chance to hide in the group. Therefore, the teacher should not put too much pressure on the student's pronunciation at any given moment. He may have to intersperse thirty-second bits of pronunciation work throughout the class. Reading aloud, traditionally a taboo in larger classes, can be used effectively in the class of one for practice in pronunciation and intonation. Every student loves reading aloud as long as he is the one doing it. In the class of one no other student is sitting around yawning and drumming his fingers.

READING

Reading is often ignored or forgotten in small classes, probably because the teacher feels he is not giving the student much attention by just allowing him to read during class time. However, reading is such a vital skill which gives the student access to a whole world of information that it should not be neglected. Reading both inside and outside the class should be encouraged.

Reading outside the class

If possible, set up a reading programme whereby the student agrees to read, say, one book a month. He then gives

feedback on it in the form of either a written or oral report. The student at the basic level will need to use simplified readers. If he has no access to a library, the teacher might set up an exchange of books between students in the same class or students in other private classes he teaches. In an advanced class teacher and student might exchange their own books and use them as topics for discussion.

Reading inside the class

A variety of ways of handling reading in class should be tried. There are a number of excellent books and articles on teaching reading, and a teacher can use them to get ideas. Here are just a few different ways to handle a text.

- A) T & S read text together. T reads aloud stopping at new vocabulary and expressions and discussing meaning with S.
- B) S reads text silently. S answers multiple-choice questions on text. T & S check answers together.
- C) S reads text silently. When he has finished, T asks a number of questions orally to check comprehension.
- D) T gives S a list of questions on text. S reads text concentrating only on finding the answers to the questions.
- E) T tells S to read text as quickly as possible to discover the main point of the text.

WRITING

The small class is ideal for teaching writing. Even in a large class a teacher normally tries to handle correction of written work on an individual basis. Generally long pieces of written work should be assigned for homework because if the student is writing during class time, the teacher may be tempted to hover over him and make corrections constantly, and the writing will not truly reflect the student's ability. The written work done at home can be corrected by the student and teacher together and re-writing can be assigned for homework.

If there is more than one student in the class, short writing exercises such as dialogues or story completion can be given during the class. The teacher may wish to assign five minutes of writing on any topic in every class to a student who wants to

develop fluency in writing. Other types of short exercises which can be done in class are cloze texts, fill-ins, jumbled sentences and traditional grammar transformation exercises.

One type of exercise that combines the four skills and can be done very successfully in a very small class is picture composition. Here are two suggestions for handling this type of composition. In the first, S looks at pictures and listens. T reads a story aloud. S looks at pictures and tries to recall story. T gives S written form of story and S studies it. T takes back written form. S writes story using only the pictures to guide him. In the second, S looks at pictures and with prompting from T creates a story orally. Then S writes story. T helps with spelling and vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

This paper is primarily based on our own experiences in private teaching, both through institutes and schools and independently. Some points grew out of conversations with other teachers. We realize that a lot of what we have said is just the kind of common sense a teacher acquires with experience, common sense that is applied after the fact rather than before. Had we known some of these things in advance, our teaching would have been easier.

We introduced this article as a possible unit for a teacher-training course. If teacher-trainees have access to experienced teachers, the material might be handled as a group project rather than as a teacher presentation. The teacher would assign each group a topic, such as Setting Up the Class, to investigate in interviews with experienced teachers. Later, the findings of the various groups would be pooled, either in a paper or in a class discussion.