

## Early techniques to manage teaching and learning of English in large classes

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Michael West (1960) approached the problem of teaching English in large school classes in the unfavourably circumscribed schools within a narrow instructional framework which looks at instruction containing two patterns training and communication. The training part is identified with the imparting of skills to the students where the instructor tells the class of learners what they have to do, demonstrates it, gives hints on difficulties and points on techniques and thereafter supervises the learners practice. The main part of the lesson is supervised practice by the class as a group of individuals. In the communication pattern the instructor is dealing with the class as a whole class nearly all the time. He imparts information, helps assimilation by question and answer, stimulates reasoning etc.

West considers a class of over thirty pupils who are ill-graded and congested on benches in an uncomfortable room as a large class in unfavourable circumstances. West (1960:6) identifies three outstanding problems which a teacher faces while teaching large classes of usually unmotivated learners of mixed abilities. These are (i) to keep up with the pupils' practice time to the maximum (ii) to keep the class together; (iii) teacher fatigue' West argues that since language learning means skills learning, the teacher should allow maximum practice of language items by the students.

About the pupils' practice time of language West says that it is fallacious to assume that when the learner is not actually responding to the language tasks by speaking or writing, he is taking no part in the lesson. Instead he says, "in the execution of any skills there is a preliminary innervation a neuro-muscular loading which is triggered off at a suitable moment (p.6). In a small class which is in close rapport with the teacher, all the pupils become loaded with the required response. "The teacher waves a hesitant finger so as to increase the doubt and tension and then one pupil is triggered off-- you | but all have acquired such practice as is



conferred by this formation of answer in the mind. If the teacher is careful and skillful these loaded answers for the most part have been correct answers.” (p.7)

If we have a large class it is obviously much more difficult to get this rapport and to ensure that all pupils are loaded especially as the chances of any pupil being called upon are forty nine to one against (If the class contains fifty students).

West also comments at the required shape of the class room and seating patterns; He finds wide rooms with adequate furniture more easy to approach and control compared to the ‘deep’ classrooms. He notices that it is very difficult to maintain rapport beyond a depth of three rows or at the very most four rows. He also says that the teachers who have to teach four periods a day with a little break after the two periods cannot do justice in the subsequent large classes. He recalls an excellent practice teaching lesson which was especially prepared to demonstrate teaching English in large classes. West however, points out that such demonstrations, practice teaching lessons happen ‘only once’ and in the normal routine, owing to the practical constraints such as large noisy classes, quick succession of teaching periods, uncomfortable physical environment of the class room, the actual teaching is distanced away from the ideal types. The teacher cannot remain faithful to the demonstration lesson, because the classroom realities demand immediate improvisation of teaching techniques from him.

After outlining the potential difficulties of an English teacher in the classroom in a large class West suggests some pedagogic techniques to solve some of the problems. Especially he mentions the techniques such as intermittent written answer, the regulation of teaching time and listening time, read and look-up, mass drill and mass practice and setting a routine of the class room activities and training the class to switch over to this routine automatically to secure the efficiency of time and work.

In the above techniques, the two techniques i.e. ‘read and look-up and ‘routinisation’ of the classroom activities are of special importance for the undergraduate students. Other techniques are more suitable for the primary and lower secondary classes. ‘Read and look-up’ technique is significant to the undergraduates especially in the classes where literary texts are discussed. In this technique a student reads loudly from the text and looks up at the class as if establishing realistic communication. West assumes that this technique develops meaningful reading and communicative behaviour in the students. Gradually students begin

to pick up large chunks of texts and sometimes at the advance level paraphrase it, deriving the textual information from their short term memory. West strongly recommends that of all the methods of learning a language ‘read and look-up’ is the most valuable. “It is possible” ‘he says, “to master a language by this method alone by carrying a book in the pocket.” (P.11)

The technique of ‘reading and looking up’ is meaningful to the undergraduates specially when they are reading dramatic and poetic texts. Following the model provided by the teacher the students can manipulate their voice control and establish realistic communication intent with their peers. However, this communication will be one-sided and rather dramatic in a formal, artificial context. It will not be interactive, authentic communication. Moreover, in a large class not all the students will be good at loud reading, and even the good students may not be able to perform well against the noisy background of the class. Although ‘read and look up’ seems a simple pedagogic technique, it demands the learner to understand what he reads and then convey it to the audience, in clear spontaneous speech. In conveying the textual information to the audience however, the learner will obviously face the difficulties of understanding the meaning of new lexical items as well as the pronunciation of the unfamiliar words. West does not say anything on it.

Secondly, the ‘routinization’ of classroom tasks is mentioned as an effective way to control and organise a large class. It is true that such a procedure, if successfully implemented, can minimise the time unnecessarily spent on organising groups etc. However, it will lead to the predicatability of the instructional events in the class and hence students may sometimes feel bored, anticipating what will be next. We, however, feel that this is an important organisational device for large classes and the teacher can reduce the element of boredom by varying the types of tasks for the groups.

From the above discussion it would appear that West’s techniques to handle large classes were based on behavioristic philosophy of habit-formation. He has not given any elaborate model for teaching and learning in large classes, but has suggested some useful techniques which he himself applied to his classes which considerable success. However, we should remember, that West used these techniques about 30 years ago in the secondary schools in India. Thus some of West’s techniques which can be typically relevant to school pupils may not appear meaningful to the undergraduate students.

Jean Forrester (1968) finds the well structured group method as one of the most effective ways of dealing with large classes in schools. The class is divided into many groups, each group containing eight pupils of mixed linguistic abilities with a bright pupil as their leader. The greater part of their exercise and practice work is done in these groups. Whatever the work, the group works as a whole and produces one group answer after discussion among the group members. Forrester suggests a free techniques of working in groups depending on the nature of language tasks, for example, if the task demands one sentence or one word answer, the leader adopts the question answer technique. He asks the members questions, when somebody from the group comes out with an answer, it is discussed among the group members and if everybody agrees that the answer is right, the group members write the answer in their note books. While the group work is on, the teacher moves around checking answers, pointing out mistakes and helping the pupils to correct them if they are unable to set them right themselves. If the teacher finds a particular mistake occurring in all the groups, he writes it on the blackboard, drawing attention of the groups and after the groups have corrected the mistakes they continue to work. As soon as any group finishes the assignment, the teacher corrects the answer in one note book, and all the other members of the group correct their exercises from the corrected notebook. If the assignment is a long answer, the teacher collects one notebook from each group and returns the corrected notebooks next day, expecting that the other members of the group will correct their exercises as well.

Forrester also proposes group method for writing paragraphs, essays precis or similar exercises. All these involve the selection of ideas and their arrangement. Teacher may ask each group to write the points they may like to include in their answer. Five minutes are given for this purpose. The teacher then asks the group to give him the points. These he writes on the black board and points out the omissions and clears up the difficulties. He also discusses the order in which these should be presented and lets the group write from this outline. The group members jointly arrive at one mutually agreed answer and write it in their note-books.

### **Advantages of the group method:**

Forrester identified the following advantages of group methods in teaching and learning of English in a large class.



- (1) For the teacher the unit of his attention is not the individual student but a group. The teacher visits every student through the group. When he is moving through the groups he may not speak to every individual but students may feel that their problems are being attended to. Thus through group the students keep a close contact with the teacher.
- (2) During the discussion of the finalisation of group answer a number of elementary mistakes are eliminated before they get on to the paper. This is extremely important for the weaker pupils. Able pupils take care of their mistakes.
- (3) As the teacher will have only a limited number of scripts to correct he will be able to correct them quickly and return them the next day. Mistakes are thus corrected while the exercise is still fresh in pupil's minds. The teacher may also note some mistakes occurring in all the groups and take steps to remedy them by preparing remedial exercises. Moreover, the teacher will have spared adequate time which he otherwise would have spent on correction work.
- (4) It is often argued when pupils work in groups, the actual work may be done only a few able pupils and the slower members do nothing but copy down what the abler ones have dictated. But we know if the weak pupils are left alone their answers will be full of mistakes. What is not so often considered is that each time a weak pupil writes a wrong form he is learning it and making it more difficult for himself to remember the right one. When he works in a group, he is prevented from writing a number of wrong forms, and if he is prevented sufficiently often the memory of these wrong forms will fade and the memory of correct ones will be established.
- (5) Apart from the mixed-ability groups, the teacher can also form ability groups in the class. Whereas he can provide remedial teaching to the class. Whereas he can provide remedial teaching to the weak pupils the abler pupils can be provided advanced language enrichment activities.
- (6) Forrester finds it an unfounded fear that pupils make much noise while conversing with the group members. On the contrary she suggests that students will keep their tones low when engaged in their group-tasks.



(7) Another difficulty may be the fixed furniture. Here Forrester suggests that if the floor is at the same level, students in the first row should turn back to face their peers in the second row and form a group of eight pupils.

(8) Some care should be taken over the allocation of students to groups. It is essential that the members be virtually congenial. Forrester however, points out that little experimental research has been done with the group technique of the college-age group students. For the practical purposes she suggests that groups should be approximately equal in ability.

Forrester finds the group method suitable especially to the grown up learners because it is a method which places more responsibility for learning on the students themselves. The lecturer mainly acts as a consultant. When this happens more learning takes place, and the discipline problem drops to the minimum. However, Forrester is aware of the teacher's difficulties if the students don't have any previous training in group work. She suggests therefore, that the teacher should convince the students about the gains of group learning. Good planning and organisation of groups and the preparation of interesting exercises on the teaching/learning materials can get the group going. Initially, until the groups are well organised there may be little problems, but when these groups learn to work actively on the material, they cover their syllabus rapidly.

Forrester's group method, though stated in simple pedagogical terms, can be profitably extended to large classes. In most of the colleges, however, especially in the colleges situated in the rural areas, the majority of students happen to be low achievers. Therefore, unless students are trained for leadership activities and group tasks, group work is not going to yield much.

Secondly, Forrester proposed the above techniques in 1968 in the school context. Since then many changes have occurred in ELT in India. At present we advocate the introduction of interactive and communicative use of English in the colleges. Forrester's approach however, is through and through behaviouristic, based on the assumptions that ELT should aim at learners' error correction rather than promoting the communicative use of English, which may allow a few errors to occur.

Forrester's approach thus appears to be educational and within the behaviouristic framework of SLA pedagogy. She has excellently combined the two crucial elements (i.e)



education and SLA Pedagogy), though some of her recommendations may not be applicable to the socio-psychological environment of the undergraduate learners. Activities such as correcting one's work by copying the 'corrected' work of one member of the group may not appeal to most of the adult undergraduates. Moreover, Forrester's work does not suggest ways to promote the communicative use of English in the learners.

#### References

Forrester, Jean. 1968. *Teaching Without Lecturing*. London : OUP.

West, M. 1960. *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances*. Open source.