

Minimizing the Chaos through Cooperative Classroom Management

There are many reasons for students to work in small groups in any class, but when the focus is on teaching them a language, the need to do so multiplies. During my time as a teacher and teacher trainer, I have heard many reasons why teachers do not want to use group work, and it seems to boil down to a feeling of being unable to control the class. Fortunately, my first few years of teaching were in a program where small-group and whole-class interactions were expected. Small classes gave students many opportunities to practice the target language and receive feedback from their peers and instructors. Years of experience in such programs left me very confident in my teaching skills.

However, when I decided to teach abroad, during my first day as a trainer of Moroccan high school English teachers my eyes were opened to the complications of large-classroom management. When I told my Moroccan colleagues that I would be

using communicative language teaching and lots of collaborative group work, many of them declared that the approach would not work because it was not how Moroccans learn. However, since I had experience successfully teaching students from many countries, including Morocco, I did not take their warnings seriously.

As I struggled through my first week, I started to doubt myself. I was beset by the pitfalls of using group work in a large classroom: I could not be in nine places at the same time, so I could not hear what all the teams were discussing; I could not control what language they were using; I could not tell if one student had been doing all the talking or if everyone had the opportunity to participate; and most importantly—the noise! Though it was “healthy noise,” as we like to say in the language classroom, it was loud, and as group members tried to hear one another over the voices of the other groups, the volume periodically increased to a deafening

level. Worse yet, with the noise at that level, how was I supposed to let them know when they should stop discussing in groups and come back to a whole-class discussion?

As you might expect, I was extremely tired and distressed after that first week. I had arrived with so much confidence and was still sure that I could train these teachers to be excellent language teachers, but something had to change. So I stepped back and thought about everything I had learned in my many years of teaching and teacher training, and I mentally slapped myself for not doing the thing that I had been telling teachers of large classrooms to do for years: give the students some responsibility for their own learning. For many teachers, this is the hardest part of cooperative learning—letting go of the reins in order to let the students have a say in how the class is run and teach learner autonomy.

As I tried to decide how best to handle the larger number of students, I thought carefully about what I was teaching them. I wanted to not only train them to be good teachers, but I also wanted them to participate in a classroom environment that they could use as a model for their own classrooms. I was sure that they could learn effectively through working collaboratively in a large classroom, but it was going to take much more organization than I was used to providing.

This article outlines a few techniques I used to organize my large classrooms and allow the learners to move fluidly from whole-class discussions to individual and group work without the customary time constraints and chaos that occur when these instructional factors are not planned out in advance.

Collaborative learning through group work

Given the evidence that active participation in learning plays such a positive role in education, I find it surprising that around the world most classrooms are still predominantly lecture based. We have learned that the act of using what we learn helps a great deal in our ability to retain information. In the 1960s, the National Training Laboratories developed the Learning Pyramid (see Abram 2010), based on research on learner retention. Though some of the findings have been disputed (Booth 2009), an obvious conclusion is that

students learn better and retain more from methods in which they are actively involved (teaching others, practicing doing, discussing) than when they are passive learners (listening to a lecture, reading, using audiovisual).

Some teachers have been taught from day one that they need to be in control at all times and have adopted the *banking* concept of education (Freire 2007)—in which the teacher's role is to deposit information into the minds of their students—and they do not deem it important for students to discover knowledge on their own or think critically about what has been read. Often teachers feel that if they are not lecturing, they are not doing their job. I even heard a teacher state that she liked being the center of attention and that when she is teaching it is her “time to shine.” In contrast, experience tells us repeatedly that we learn language by using it (Eskey 1986). Simply telling our students about the language and then sending them out to practice it on their own is not the most effective way for them to retain the knowledge.

Nowhere is collaborative learning and group work more important than in the language classroom. In the majority of language learning settings, even in programs where the target language is spoken outside of class, your classroom may be the only place that your students feel confident practicing the language and trying out new vocabulary and phrases. If we want to be the best teachers we can be, we need to focus on the most efficient and effective use of our time, even in large classrooms. Following are some practical ways to introduce group work into large classrooms and support cooperative learning.

The ideal group size

For several reasons, researchers and practitioners conclude the ideal size for a group is four students (Richards and Bohlke 2011; Kagan and Kagan 2009). One is that if you want the students to do pair work, they are already seated next to or across from a partner; another reason is that with groups larger than four, it becomes harder for all students to hear and participate, and at the same time it becomes easier for a student to pull back from the group and let the others do most of the discussing. One reason I like groups of four is that if one student is absent, I still have a

“group” rather than a pair. In a previous class, I had one or two students who were frequently absent because of other responsibilities, so I made sure to put them in groups with four members so that their absence had less impact on the remaining students.

Forming groups

If possible, it is important to arrange the desks so that the teacher can move easily between groups and around the classroom to monitor groups while they are discussing or working on projects. To avoid taking up class time and disturbing other classes with the noise of moving furniture, we always move the desks or tables before the class begins. When I have the luxury of my own classroom, we arrange the desks the way we want, and they often remain that way throughout the term. However, when I do not have this luxury, I simply ask the students to help me arrange the desks at the beginning of each class and put them back at the end. My students are very good about putting the desks in groups of four. The desks and the students are often all in place before I even get to the classroom.

Another option, if it really is too troublesome to move desks, is to have teams sit in pairs with one pair directly in front of the other. In this way, the front pair only needs to swing around in their chairs to discuss with the other pair in their team. I usually try it both ways a few times and then ask the students which they prefer. Most choose to move the desks so that they are facing each other, even if it means the desks need to be moved before and after class.

Collecting student information

Most of the time, I like to create well-mixed heterogeneous groups. To do this, I place students with the same field of study, hometown, gender, likes/dislikes, etc. into different groups. One way to find out this information is to collect it from the students on the first day of class. Some instructors have information sheets that they have students fill out; however, I prefer to have students complete individual cards so I can re-arrange groups by placing the cards on my desk and dealing them out like a deck of cards. Here is the information that I like to have on the cards:

- Name and preferred name
- Study buddy
- Hometown
- Languages spoken
- Field of study
- Email/phone
- Interests
- Goals

My Chinese students write their name in Chinese, their name in pinyin (the roman alphabet version of their Chinese characters), and also the name they wish to be called in class—their preferred name. Some students like using an English name, while others prefer to be called by either their family/last name or given/first name. So I tell them on the first day that whatever they write on their card as their preferred name will be what I call them for the entire term. You may be surprised at the result—my favorite so far is “Encore.” He says that, as a budding musician, he has this name because when he is up on stage he can hear people calling his name when they want to hear more!

It can be effective for students to choose a study buddy. When students pre-select one person to work with outside class, I can quickly assign projects, get handouts to missing students, and request that the two students study together as they prepare for exams. For one project, the study buddies were assigned to go to a campus club meeting together and then individually write about it in their journals. They also did partner presentations in class, and each student had someone to prepare with. Students who initially do not know anyone on campus often end up hanging out with their study buddies, even when they do not need to.

The information collected on the cards is vital to forming heterogeneous groups and also helps the teacher make connections among students.

Keeping track of groups

I like students to have the opportunity to work with different classmates throughout the term, which makes it necessary to track who has worked together before. To do this, I mark the cards so that I know who was in the previous group; this information allows me to quickly arrange students into new groups. For example, I put an “A” at the top of four cards for the first group, a “B” at the top of the four

cards for the second group, and so on. When I want to switch groups later, I can see which students have worked together previously. By the end of the term, the top of the cards will look something like this: C/E/A/A/C. The letter itself is not what is important; what matters is how it lines up with the groups. For example, if Student 1 has C/E/A/A/C at the top of her card, I would probably not want to put her in a group with Student 2 (A/E/B/D/B) because they worked together the second time I switched groups (they were both in group E). Of course, when I have a smaller class, students may need to work together more than once, but in that case I try to make sure that they have not worked with at least two students in the group.

Rainbow learning

Some instructors advocate assigning a specific person to be the spokesperson for a group; however, I feel it is more helpful to rotate speakers to ensure that all students are participating and contributing to the class. One way to organize this is known as “Numbered Heads Together” (Kagan and Kagan 2009). In my modified version of this cooperative technique, I assign a color to each person in the group. I prefer colors instead of numbers because I think that psychologically, having a number “1” student in each group may identify that student as somehow superior, even though for these purposes it is just a number. To organize the colors, which match a rainbow, one student in each group is RED, another is ORANGE, another is YELLOW, and the fourth is GREEN.

The first couple of times I organize groups with a new class, I also make sure that RED is in the front left seat, ORANGE in the back left, YELLOW in the back right, and GREEN in the front right seat. This extra step is most helpful when I am working with lower-level students who may be confused by my instructions. When I say, “I’d like all the GREENS to stand up,” and not all the students in that position stand up, I know that they either did not understand the instructions or are afraid that I will ask them to speak, and so do not want to stand up. Eventually, however, once they realize that everyone in the class will be speaking and that making mistakes is part of the process, they readily stand up and answer the questions they are asked.

If I have only three people in a group, I select one person to be two colors. In the beginning, I usually have YELLOW take on GREEN, but later in the course, especially because some students will always choose to sit in a particular seat, such as the YELLOW seat, I will switch it around and have another color take on GREEN. As stated above, I try to avoid having groups larger than four. However, on the occasion that it becomes necessary, I assign two students to share a color, meaning that they will take turns being the spokesperson for the group when it is their color’s turn.

The use of colors works well with students who are reluctant to volunteer to speak and need encouragement. It also works well when I have a few students who like to dominate the group because they get their turn to speak, but they also realize that they need to let the other “colors” have a chance. I sometimes convey the importance of participation to these dominant students and explain that when they work with their shyer classmates and help them have more confidence, everyone in their group is learning and improving. Not long ago, I noticed one of my weaker students having a complete conversation in English with his teammates while we were working on projects that did not necessarily require any conversation. I loved observing him come out of his shell, especially when he had no idea I was even watching him.

In one of my workshops, a teacher noted that by assigning the students a color, I do not have to learn their names. While this is true, and I agree that the color designations make it much easier for me to get full participation from all my students at the beginning of the term before I have had a chance to memorize names, I have also found that organizing the students in groups makes it easier to learn their names because I can break a large class into small chunks. I make a point of memorizing the names of at least one group each day, so that, depending on how often my class meets, I will have the entire class memorized within a couple of weeks. I have found that it is much easier to memorize four names at a time than it is to memorize 40!

Although I like to start with colors, we would all get bored if we used them throughout the entire term. Therefore, when I switch the teams, I usually also switch the titles of the

roles. We have used the four directions (North, South, East, and West) and the four seasons, but it is most interesting when I let the students decide. My students this semester have chosen such things as musical instruments and countries. The more I let them have fun with the roles, the more creative they become.

Setting expectations

One of the most important elements in effective group work is to set clear expectations of how students should act while they are in groups. In my experience, it works best to take the time to discuss expectations with students and decide together on consequences if an expectation is not followed (e.g., What is the consequence if a group becomes too loud? What should we do if someone is not participating?). The more ownership I give my students, the better their buy-in is and the more likely they are to live up to my expectations.

In addition to clear expectations, I like to give each student a role to help monitor the class, as well as to encourage responsibility and leadership. As described below, these roles can be combined with student colors and are easily rotated.

RED: Topic monitor

This student has the role of keeping the group on topic. Once students get to know each other, it becomes easy for them to forget the focus of the task and begin discussing other things, such as what they did over the weekend or what they plan to do during the lunch break. Having someone in charge of the topic gives him or her the responsibility of bringing the group back to the task at hand.

ORANGE: Volume monitor

This student has the “remote control” for the group; not only does the volume monitor have the role of keeping the volume of the group low, but he or she also controls the “mute” button and is responsible for quieting the group when it is time for silence.

YELLOW: Language monitor

This person has the role of reminding the group members to practice their English. Depending on the level of the class, I may or may not use this monitoring role, but I have had great success with it even at lower levels. Two of the first phrases I teach my students are “How do you say _____ in English?”

and “What does _____ mean?” By using these phrases, even lower-level students can use the target language effectively and build confidence in their language use.

GREEN: Participation monitor

This student has the role of making sure everyone participates and no one dominates the discussion. This balance among group members is particularly important when you have students in heterogeneous groups in which half of the students are confident in their speaking and the other half are not. This job becomes easier to monitor after I have spoken to the more dominant speakers about the benefits of listening to other people’s opinions and giving everyone a chance to practice.

To keep the students from getting bored with their roles, I rotate them either daily or weekly, depending on how often the class meets. For example, the second week the role of the volume monitor moves to RED, the role of topic monitor moves to GREEN, and the other roles rotate accordingly.

Finally, I add other roles as needed, and I am sure you can think of many more that you would want to use with your students. And because the students already know what color they have been assigned, additional roles can be assigned quickly and efficiently. For example, I can say, “In this next activity, YELLOW is the writer and ORANGE is the timer.” In a different activity I can say, “I’d like for RED to collect everyone’s papers, check that everyone on their team has remembered to write their names, and bring the papers to the front.”

Establishing consequences

In addition to discussing expectations, I like to discuss what happens if one of the monitors in a group is not doing his or her job and let the students decide what the consequences will be. In one class, the students decided that if a student is not doing what he or she should in the group, the monitor should remind that student. If the student continues to not participate properly, such as by not speaking English, that student will have to stand for two minutes. If the language monitor is not doing his or her job of encouraging this student to speak English, the language monitor must also stand for two minutes. Those were the consequences the students decided upon.

Because of the lightheartedness of how I introduce these roles and consequences, my clear explanation of the importance of everyone's participation, and the fact that I have given the students the responsibility of deciding the consequences, we rarely have incidences where they need to be enforced—but the students do enjoy enforcing them on the rare occasion that someone forgets.

Several of the Moroccan teacher-trainees thanked me when I first implemented roles and consequences because it helped them overcome the discomfort of notifying their peers when one of them got off task. With the roles assigned, they had the responsibility of doing so, and the awkwardness disappeared.

Anticipating chaos

One thing that is important to remember is that if your students are not used to doing group work or do not know each other very well, doing a group activity will initially cause chaos, no matter how well organized you are. This is normal. When teachers try group work for the first time, they sometimes feel that the chaos is overwhelming and decide not to try group work again; however, as students become accustomed to using group work and get to know one another better, the unnecessary chatter subsides. Then they are able to get on task more quickly and stay engaged for longer periods of time.

Knowing that the first time will be a bit chaotic, I do not make the first group work assignment difficult. I start with a simple task:

Introduce yourself to your group. What is your name? Where are you from?
What are you studying? What do you like to do in your free time?

Starting with tasks that are easy to do helps students learn to enjoy and look forward to group work, especially if they are given time to get to know their group members well.

Rotating groups

I like to keep students together for extended periods of time and change groups at natural breaks, such as at the end of a unit. Students get to know one another better and are able to work together more easily if they have several opportunities to discuss the course topics both in and outside class. The teacher-trainees in Morocco did several group projects, and I

found that by labeling each group by its project, I could move students quickly from group to group on a day-by-day basis. For example, if the students were working on three projects outside class with three different groups of classmates, I might want to have them sit with a different group each day. On Monday, they could discuss their Cultural Workshop Projects if I wrote the following on the board: "Please sit with your CWP group." On Tuesday, they could focus on their Service Learning Projects if I asked them to sit with their SLP team, and on Wednesday they could talk about the progress of their Textbook Analysis Projects if I asked them to sit with their TAP team.

In addition, I easily schedule "reunions" with group members that they had worked with at the beginning of the year by asking them periodically to sit with group members from projects that they have finished. One reason to hold these reunions is the benefit of letting students share ideas about a new project with people from other teams (this is an adaptation of the 3 Stray Structure, Kagan and Kagan 2009). In this way, students are able to talk to classmates that they know well but have not had the opportunity to work with lately and at the same time get new ideas for their current projects.

Conclusion

One criticism I often hear from teachers is that their class is too large for group work. My response is that the larger the class is, the more important it is to use group work, especially in language classes. One of my main objectives is for students to practice English during class time. They will rarely have this opportunity if the class is mostly teacher-centered. When I am leading the class and speaking with students one at a time while the rest of the class is silent, then only those few students get any verbal practice. But if I organize the class so that they do group work some of the time, *all* students have a chance to practice the language in their groups, and usually all have the chance to speak during whole-class discussions when their color is called.

I also know that some instructors choose to do pair work only because they feel that forming groups is too much of a hassle. Although pair work may be fine for some situations, in a classroom of 40 or more students, pairs result in 20 voices at a time, and that can be

overwhelming for me, for my students, and for the classroom next door. However, with the expectations set up in advance, where the shift is from one voice at a time to organized groups where the maximum is ten voices speaking at once, noise is reduced considerably.

By organizing my classes—no matter what the age or objectives—using the techniques discussed in this article, I can effectively work with my students and they can learn from one another easily. I hope that you will try some of these techniques and minimize the chaos in your classroom.

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