

ESL classes vary in many ways but one of the most important differences is the number of students. Class size can have a significant impact on how you approach your teaching. Although teaching either small classes or large classes requires a more or less similar approach, there are some unique challenges and opportunities that each brings with them.

Small classes can range from just a few students to around twenty, and some teachers enjoy teaching small classes and others find them challenging. Often, teaching in a more intimate environment that small classes bring can foster more spontaneous and meaningful interactions between the teacher and students, thus improving the whole learning experience. However, this is not a given, so it is useful to examine the opportunities and challenges presented when teaching smaller groups.



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The Challenges

Overly Rapid Work Completion

It is often the case in smaller classes that students complete their work more quickly, and this is not always a bad thing. However, there are advantages with students moving through work more slowly and deliberately. Therefore, teachers can leverage this situation by allowing students to explore topics more fully and give them time to absorb information more completely or practice a skill more fully.

Alternatively, it may be a good idea to have backup material ready to fill time in this situation. Back-up material can vary according to the topic but could include games, extra problems, more demanding work, puzzles, another unit of the coursebook, or extension activities that are differentiated for mixed-level classes.

Increased Student Anxiety

In a small class, there is nowhere to hide, so for students who enjoy the anonymity associated with being in a big class, there may be some discomfort. These students may not enjoy the spotlight and prefer to blend into the background as the lesson progresses. Some students may also feel pressure to always be involved and contributing to the lesson, and always take some kind of role in group work. Although this can be a good thing, it can also increase anxiety. Teachers should try to identify when students are struggling with this pressure and try to nurture them in a manner different from those who are more outgoing and inclined to dominate tasks. This may be as simple as instilling confidence in the first few classes through consistent praise. Also, give these students time to become more familiar and comfortable with you and the other students before putting them on the spot.

It is also helpful to manage expectations as a way of reducing anxiety. Try to make it clear to students that you understand that language learning can be very challenging and confronting and that you are not expecting perfection. In fact, always remind them of the crucial role errors have in the language learning process. Try not to place too much emphasis on mistakes when giving students feedback and place much more emphasis on what they are doing well. Also, give lots of praise when you see participation and engagement. This should help create an atmosphere that is less intimidating and more conducive to effective language acquisition.

Attendance Issues and Fewer Activity Options

Having one or two students absent in a larger class does not present a problem, but this may not be the case in a small class. In a class of 10, two missing students could make certain activities a challenge and may require the teacher to make unplanned changes to the lesson.

Some class activities require a minimum number of participants. A small class size can present a problem for activities such as small group projects because there are fewer students to divide into groups, limiting students' options. Other options, such as large-scale games, may be either difficult or less enjoyable in a small group because either there are too few pupils to allow for gameplay or too few teams to make a game competitive.

As a teacher of a small group, you need to have a backup plan for pair or group work in these situations. For instance, if a game has been planned where students compete in groups, consider whether it would work just as well if students competed in pairs or individually. Additionally, if an activity or game is not essential to achieving the main learning aim, it may present an opportunity to delve deeper into a particular topic or skill or even free up some class time to allow students to do preparation work for assessments such as group presentations or other coursework. Students may appreciate this because when they are working individually at home the teacher is not readily on hand to offer advice or assistance when it is most useful.

Lack of Diversity

A smaller class can be less representative of the diversity in the wider community. While this is not a critical disadvantage, it can impact the overall atmosphere and dynamics of the class. Students can miss out on the benefit of being members of a diverse class which can bring the opportunity to hear viewpoints that are different from their own and have the opportunity to engage with these new ideas. With this in mind, just as in a large class, it is important to not allow one or two students to dominate discussions or whole class activities. Make sure that all students are encouraged to find their voice and contribute without fear of interruption or ridicule.

Opportunities

More Individual Attention

Students benefit from small classes as they have more one-on-one time with the teacher as the teacher is less occupied with such things as managing behaviour, organising interactions, and managing time. This makes it easier for teachers to meet individual student needs. This advantage is perhaps best exemplified when it comes to providing feedback.

Because there are fewer students to manage in a small class, feedback can be provided in a more individualized way. This is due, in many instances, to the simple practicality of time. In a 90-minute feedback session, the teacher can give more detailed and nuanced individual feedback to a group of 16 compared to a group of 25.

Offering more personalized feedback gives the student a clearer understanding of which aspects of the language they need to pay more attention to. Additionally, detailed, and useful feedback can help students in setting more targeted and effective learning goals.

Smaller classes also allow teachers to observe individual students in more detail and thus become more aware of their particular strengths and weaknesses as well as their learning preferences. This is useful information that helps teachers plan and prepare lessons that are more tailored to the needs of the group. For instance, students learn in different ways, so the teacher can take time to present teaching material in different ways that are appropriate for students. That is much more difficult to do with a large class. In small classes, teachers have more time to account for differentiation within the class. As the teacher can become very familiar with each student, it is easier to set individual learning goals and to monitor progress, and still cover everything in the syllabus.

More Student-centred

Small classes are generally more communicative than large groups, mostly because they are more conducive to student-centred teaching. This style of teaching should create an atmosphere in which students have more opportunities to engage more fully and meaningfully with the content and more opportunity for productive practice of the language through speaking and writing.

One of the great advantages of a small class is that it promotes more learner autonomy. Learner autonomy simply means your students' ability to learn independently and to take the initiative to develop an understanding on their own. The idea is to make them less dependent on the teacher, for either motivation or quick answers. When students play a central role in their learning, it becomes more meaningful and fosters a greater level of engagement in the learning process. To facilitate learner autonomy, the teacher should act as a guide or mentor to help students navigate through the learning process. This facilitator role is more difficult to realise in a larger class.

An effective way of promoting greater learner autonomy is through project-based learning. Project-based learning involves students actively engaging in more meaningful and authentic projects.

A project can last anywhere from a week or up to a semester and could have students solving a real-world problem or answering a complex question. In a language class, an example of a project could involve groups of students creating a concept for their own restaurant which includes a menu, pricing, advertising, and a theme. This may be an effective way for students to learn and apply language in a Business English course. Once the project has been completed, students can present their findings to the class.

Apart from helping to develop deeper content knowledge, projects help students practice critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication. This helps increase student engagement and improve learning outcomes.

More Flexibility

Often, a smaller class size means having more space. This makes it easier to move students around and make use of locations within the room to become associated with particular activities, making it easier to set up group and pair work. For example, a corner of the class could become associated with learning through role-play, discussion, or a graded reader book club.

Small classes allow the teacher to ask more challenging questions or set more challenging tasks simply because there may be more time to do so. These tasks can be achieved through making use of pair and group work and engaging the class in sustained discussion. This also means there is less dependence on the coursebook and gives the teacher the ability to employ more creativity in their teaching.

Small classes make it more practical to have students read up on and prepare for topics from the coursebook for homework. This can free up time for Q&A and interaction during the lesson. For older or more advanced students, they could use this preparation to lead a discussion on a topic in class.

A Supportive Learning Environment

Small classes allow for greater student involvement. This is because they help create an environment that fosters sharing and teamwork as topics are explored through interactive tasks such as discussions.

Having fewer students in a class means that the group has a better chance of becoming more familiar and comfortable with one another. There are many opportunities for more communication between the teacher and students and between students than in larger classes. Small class sizes positively influence the way students interact with each other. This is because small classes provide an opportunity for students to develop closeness and a cooperative spirit. Factions or cliques are less likely to emerge in small classes. This can also help counter the anxiety that may come with learning in smaller groups. This all helps to create a safer environment where students are more confident in taking the necessary risks that language learning requires. Therefore, classes become communicative and participatory.

In a small class, students get noticed and receive more help than in large classes. Drawing out an individual student in a large group can be very difficult. Drawing out a student in a small class is not only easier, but is effective, and should be expected.

Some Key Questions to Consider:

Does the class size matter more than the teacher?

While there are clear benefits and advantages associated with smaller class sizes, this on its own does not guarantee a better learning experience. Quality teaching and learning can occur in a class of any size. The teacher is more important than the class size, so it is essential that a teacher has a sound understanding of the dynamics of small class teaching and plan and prepare lessons accordingly.

Are different teaching methods required for small class sizes?

In most instances, teaching approaches that work well in large classes are equally appropriate in smaller classes. The key point is how the teacher modifies and alters their methods to meet the differing requirements between small and large classes. No matter the size, all classes still require clear learning objectives, effective routines, classroom management, and opportunities to review and give feedback, etc.

Final Thoughts

It is difficult to argue against the idea that small classes are preferable to large classes. A small class can become a community with shared goals that lead to a positive spirit and higher expectations for both the teacher and students. Small classes enable students to support one another with greater ease and confidence than in larger-sized classes. Teachers have more time to adapt to the needs of the students, develop and plan for more relevant and effective activities, and review student progress. However, teachers should not ignore the fact that small classes come with their own unique issues. These issues can be easily overcome if the teacher is well organised, ensures there is variation in teaching methods, provides variation across the week in terms of activities, and employs changes to the dynamics of the class and learning.