

THE ORAL APPROACH WITH LARGE CLASSES

Russell N. Campbell
University of Michigan

"Your methods may be all right for small classes, but what do you do with classes of forty-five students?"

"I understand and like your approach, but how can I get participation from a class the size of mine? I don't know who's repeating or who understands. I can't hear who's making mistakes."

"I can't have choral repetition with nearly fifty students in my class. It would disturb the whole school."

The list of such quotations could continue for page after page. They come from teachers of English all over the world who have heard of the oral approach¹ to language teaching. Most of them are teachers in secondary schools. Because of shortages of teachers and classrooms, and the ever increasing number of students, nearly every one of them has the same complaint, "huge classes." It seems that we can adequately present the case for the oral approach and its efficient scientific methods. However, until we can answer such questions as those above, our theories fall on many a polite but dubious ear. Indeed, after visiting schools where every classroom is packed with students (anywhere from thirty-five to sixty) one can appreciate the teacher's hesitating to teach pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and pattern practice orally to such overwhelming numbers.

What I have to propose to teachers of these large classes is not new, nor is it exotic—it is simply a practical plan that has shown good results in large classes in Thailand and two countries in Latin America.

Before going into this plan I would like to say that experience in the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan has shown that a class of ten to twelve students of similar language background and proficiency in English provides a highly effective situation for the teaching of English with the oral

¹"oral approach" here and throughout the article is used as C. C. Fries describes it on pages six through ten in his *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* (Ann Arbor, 1954).

approach. With a group of this size individual and choral repetition of oral grammar drills, pattern practice, and pronunciation drills can be carried out with maximum opportunity for the students to develop the language habits that constitute the learning of a second language. This means (ideally) that during eighty-five percent of the class period the students are actively engaged in learning the new language habits by controlled oral drills. Only fifteen percent of the time is given over to the teacher explaining grammar "rules," demonstrating contrasts, setting the patterns, or otherwise taking class time to teach about the language rather than develop the new skills in producing and understanding the language on the part of the students.

How can we get this ideal situation in our bulging class of fifty? Actually we can not. We can approximate it, however, and the results are so superior to those gained by the slow, plodding, "translating," "grammar explaining" methods used in most English teaching classes throughout the world, that an approximation is truly a remarkable advancement. It is so remarkable that, with rare exceptions, it makes the difference between producing students with some control of the phonological and grammatical structures of the new language and producing students who have spent year after year in language courses, only to finish with a negligible control of any aspect of the new language.

The solution, then, that we have found to be successful is this. In a class of the size found to be usual in many countries, we can divide the class into groups of six to ten students each, and each of these groups is conditioned by the teacher to react and respond as one student. A class of fifty students can be divided as indicated in the following diagram:

Teacher	0 ₅ 0	0 ₆ 0	0 ₇ 0	0 ₈ 0
	0 0	0 0	0 0	0 0
Teacher	0 ₁ 0	0 ₂ 0	0 ₃ 0	0 ₄ 0
	0 0	0 0	0 0	0 0

Fig. 1

This division, or any similar division, depending upon the physical shape of the room and arrangement of the seats, would be made at the beginning of the course and the students of each

group made aware that they are members of Group 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, or 8.

Although at first this division may seem awkward, and some individuals within the groups may hesitate to respond as part of the group (just as they would if they were called upon to respond as individuals), these groups soon learn to react as a unit and the class runs smoothly, either when called on in order—Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, etc.—or at random by group number.

If the reader has ever observed a traditional class of this size, he knows that the usual class room procedure, except for silent reading, copying from textbooks, or written translation work, consists of the teacher "explaining" grammar rules and proceeding through exercises calling on one student at a time while the remaining forty-eight or forty-nine await their turns (or perhaps, sit hoping the teacher will not have time to get to them at all that day). The best that can be hoped for in this type of teaching, is that each student, in one class hour, might have the opportunity to translate one line, or read a line or two from a book. Even this is seldom realized. The possibility that any new language habits will be developed under these circumstances is remote.

The oral approach will give every student a minimum of fifteen to twenty minutes practice in speaking the new language during a single class period. If mass choral repetition will interfere with other classes, it can be limited to choral repetition by groups. If fifty voices repeating together do not bother the rest of the school, then the percentage of time the students are actually speaking is increased and repetitions by groups will be used for testing the results of previous presentations, just as is done in our ideal class of twelve students. In either case, whether it be fifteen minutes or forty minutes of participation on the part of every student, it is a vast improvement over the minute or two he has had under present circumstances.

With reference to oral testing, a teacher might have difficulty in isolating a mispronunciation or an incorrect repetition of a pattern in a group of fifty pupils reciting together. However, these things are easily and quickly picked out from a group of six, eight or even twelve students. After a pattern has been presented and drilled en masse, it can be effectively checked by going from group to group with test drills.

In arranging pupils, frequent rearrangement is suggested to keep the groups as homogeneous as possible; i. e., if in Group 5 there are two very bright students and four slower ones, the slower students will always follow the two brighter ones. They

will usually be a half beat behind, waiting for the brighter students to give the cue to the response called for. If all in the group learn at about the same rate, they will have to depend more on themselves for responses. It will also save a great deal of time if the slower students are put together in one group. It is likely that on any given problem they will all have the same difficulty and need additional repetitions from the teacher. If there is a slow student in each of the groups, then the teacher will have to give extra repetitions for the one slow student in each group. If they are grouped together, the teacher can concentrate on all of them at the same time and the other groups can be dealt with more quickly.

0 0 0 1 ● 0 0	0 0 0 5 0 0 0
0 0 0 2 0 ● 0	● 0 0 6 0 0 0
0 0 0 3 0 0 0	0 ● 0 7 0 0 0
0 0 0 4 0 ● 0 0	0 0 0 8 ● 0 0 0

Fig. 2

0 0 0 1 0 0 0	● ● ● 5 ● ● ●
0 0 0 2 0 0 0	0 0 0 6 0 0 0
0 0 0 3 0 0 0	0 0 0 7 0 0 0
0 0 0 4 0 0 0 0	0 0 0 8 0 0 0 0

Fig. 3

To demonstrate this, in Figure 2, the solid circles represent the slower students. If left in their original groups, as in Figure 2, the teacher will have to pause and "help" these students in Groups 1,2,4,6,7 and 8, after the other members of those groups have responded adequately. On the other hand if the six slow students are put in one group, as in Figure 3, the teacher can help all of them with the same problem at the same time, and time will be greatly economized.

Obviously with every student participating for such a large percentage of the class time, each student will be more alert and attentive to the material being presented and drilled than when the older type of classroom procedures are used. Changing the routine by calling on the groups at random, rather than always in consecutive order, forces the students to remain attentive and helps to keep them interested.

The major tasks—or the keys to success—in using the oral approach with such a division of students, are getting the groups to function as a unit and the teacher's developing the ability to hear the individual voices in group response so that slow students may be detected and urged on and incorrect responses may be heard and corrected.

The following three examples, one in pronunciation, one in grammar, and one in vocabulary, show how oral-type drills can be presented and conducted with a class as large as fifty students. (A study of the English Language Institute *Vocabulary, Pattern Practice, Pronunciation, and Sentence Patterns* books will give hundreds of other drills that can be used with this kind of arrangement).

1. Pronunciation: Recognition drill for [e] and [ɛ] contrast.

		Teacher			
T: <i>met-mate</i> : are these the same or different?					
Grp. 1: (in unison) different.	1		5	T: <i>tale-tale</i> Grp. 5: same	
T: <i>bet-bait</i> ?				T: <i>fed-fed</i> Grp. 6: same	
Grp. 2: (in unison) different.	2		6		
T: <i>let-let</i>				T: <i>laid-led</i> Grp. 7: same	
Grp. 3: same.	3		7		
T: <i>pen-pain</i>				T: <i>paper-pepper</i> Grp. 7: different	
Grp. 4: different	4		8		

Fig. 4

The teacher would continue this drill, calling on the groups in order or at random, until all of the students hear the difference readily, then proceed to teach the production of these sounds.

2. Grammar: Oral drill of *him*, *her*, and *them*.

Teacher	
1	5
2	6
3	7
4	8

T: *He gave the book to John:*
Grp.1: He gave the book to him. (in unison)

T: *He gave the book to Mary:*
Grp.2: He gave the book to her.

T: *John.*
Grp.3: He gave the book to him.

T: *Mary.*
Grp.4: He gave the book to her.

T: *John and Mary.*
Grp.5: He gave the book to them.

T: *Mary.*
Grp.6: He gave the book to her.

T: *John, ~~and~~ Mary.*
Grp.7: He gave the book to him.

T: *John and Mary.*
Grp.8: He gave the book to them.

Fig. 5

Again the teacher would repeat the drill pointing to or calling on the groups until the use of *him*, *her*, and *them* in this frame becomes automatic.

3. Vocabulary: Expressions of telling time. (Teacher equipped with a clock with movable hands.)

Teacher	
1	5
2	6
3	7
4	8

T: *What time is it?*
Grp.1: (seeing hour set by the teacher)
It's two o'clock.

Grp.1: *What time is it?*
Grp.2: (new setting). It's three o'clock.

Grp.2: *What time is it?*
Grp.3: It's six o'clock.
Grp.3: *What time is it?*

Grp.4: It's five o'clock.
Grp.4: *What time is it?*

Grp.5: It's nine o'clock.
Grp.5: *What time is it?*

Grp.6: It's four o'clock.
What time is it?

Grp.7: It's eleven o'clock.
Grp.7: *What time is it?*

Grp.8: It's twelve o'clock.
Grp.8: *What time is it?*

Fig. 6