

5. The number of students matters

Teaching adults brings some specific forms and class arrangements which often depend on the type of students and, more importantly, reflect the need that comes in that moment.

This chapter looking into **three most common forms of teaching adult learners** based on the number of students, namely **teaching large groups**, **teaching small groups** and **teaching one to one**.

Regardless of the group size, learning environment should provide an opportunity for students to obtain a deep understanding of the material. (Biggs 1989 in Surgenor 2010).¹ The learning environment should comprise the following factors:

- **Motivational context:** intrinsic motivation. Students need to see both learning goals and learning processes as relevant to them, to feel some ownership of course and subject.
- **Learner Activity:** students need to be active not passive. Deep learning is associated with doing rather than passively receiving.
- **Interaction with others:** discussions with peers requires students to explain their thinking, this, in turn, can improve their thinking
- **A well-structured knowledge base:** the starting point for new learning should be existing knowledge and experience. Learning programmes should have a clearly displayed structure and should be related to other knowledge, and not presented in isolation.

Large Groups

Teaching large groups has certain specific features. Taking into account a language class, large group does not necessarily mean giving lectures. In language education, 15 + students is considered a large group. However, one teacher's definition of a 'large' group may be very different from another's. Large groups are reality in many countries and, teaching them poses some challenges, for example:

- It's difficult to keep a good discipline going in large classes.
- You have to provide for more learners of different abilities, wanting to learn different things at different speeds and in different ways.
- You can't easily give each child the individual attention they need.
- You may not have enough books or teaching and learning aids.²

There are several possible ways to cope with these challenges, e.g. if you want to develop or keep a good discipline in the class (which is also the case of adult learners), establish a code of behaviour which adult learners should be more willing to follow than young learners. Work on the code of behaviour together with your students. It should state clear basic rules of conduct that students understand. Examples may include: they have to work quietly, they can talk but not loudly, students who have finished their lesson tasks can read a book to keep them busy. Sometimes, you may use environment outside the classroom. It offers a new, different space, the change to which students will very likely have positive reactions. In large groups, you can still group students and appoint group leaders and delegate some of your basic responsibilities.

¹ SURGENOR, P. Teaching Toolkit, Large and Small Group Teaching, UCD Dublin 2010

² <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-large-classes>

When you have to provide for more learners of different abilities and / or goals, a possible solution is grouping students. To do so, you need to know your students. Students may be grouped based on their similar features or differences depending on what you need them to do. Students may be grouped as follows:

1. Grouping by varying skill level: Even though a more advanced student will speak more than his lower level partner, he is not losing out of the deal because the more advanced student is still learning through teaching other members in his group. Students can sometimes learn as much from each other as they do from the teacher.

2. Grouping by the same skill level: While students can learn a lot by working with classmates at different language skill levels, that isn't always the way you want to partner up your students. In a group of all beginners, someone will have to speak up, and that means your lower level students will be talking more in class. In your group of all advanced students, everyone may want to drive the conversation. That means the members of that group will have to work on their discourse skills like taking turns speaking and using active listening.³

3. Grouping to suit the student's abilities: Teachers of large classes have tried various strategies. The more able students in the group can help the others to master the work so that the teacher need not teach some parts. **Same-ability groups:** The teacher can leave the groups of faster learners to get on with the work on their own. He can give extra help to individual learners in the slower groups. Teacher monitors the groups himself. The teacher needs to move around the classroom to see what progress learners are making and what problems are coming up. He can give advice, encouragement and extra individual help where it is needed.

Grouping can also help in a large class when resources are lacking: Group work can help you manage with few textbooks, or even only one text book. If you do not have enough books for each student, form groups so that each group has one book. If you have only one book, let each group have some time to work with the book. The other groups can do activities that fit in with the theme of the passage in the book. For example, if the topic is 'family life' those groups who have not read yet can work on pre-reading tasks around 'family life'. They can write down words they know on that topic or talk about their families. Those groups who have finished reading can talk about what they have read or write down a summary. After about ten minutes give the book to another group, so that by the end of the lesson all the groups will have done some work with the book.

In general, in large classes, students in pairs or groups can help each other and learn from each other. They don't get bored listening to teacher talk.

Working with large groups may bring these additional advantages:

- When there are many students in a class they can share many different ideas and interesting life experiences. This stimulates the children and enlivens those parts of your lesson where children can discuss and learn from each other.
- During project work, children can learn to share responsibility and help each other. This also brings variety and speeds up the work.⁴

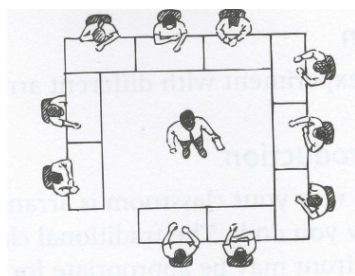
To work with a large group, teacher needs to consider some classroom management, the way that teachers and students use to manage students' learning by organising and controlling what

³ <https://www.fluentu.com/blog/educator-english/esl-group-work/>

⁴ <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-large-classes>

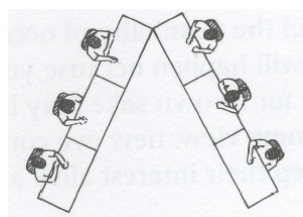
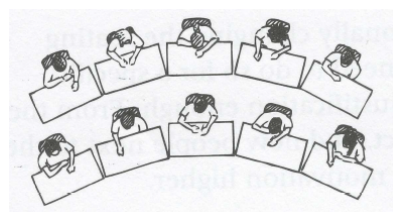
happens in the classroom. Or the way that you consciously decide not to organize and control. Or the way that you delegate or relinquish such control to the learners.⁵

Classroom management in large groups includes varied aspects of teacher's and students' behaviour in the classroom. For the purpose of this paper though, only the sitting arrangement will be considered because the other aspects may be equally, or almost equally applied to classrooms and groups of any size. As for the classroom layout, classroom management is like housekeeping that you do to your place. Large classes need special and, in the same time, effective classroom layout and classroom arrangement. Jim Scrivener (2012) in his book on classroom management techniques included the following arrangements:



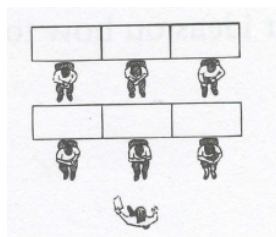
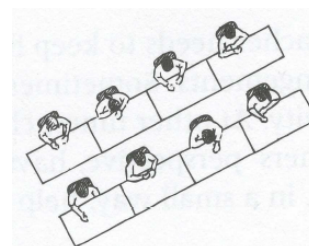
Rectangular: Arrange rows of desks and seats around all four edges of the room, or closer in, allowing space to walk behind the seats.

Curved rows: Rather than the typical straight-line rows, try curving the lines a little, perhaps facing a long wall of the room (rather than the narrower front wall)



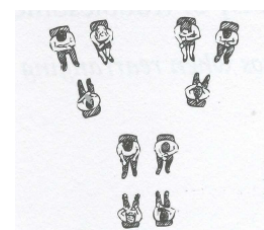
Arrowhead: A shape made up of diagonal rows with the arrow pointing towards the back of the class. This permits more eye contact. It also allows more open space at the front of the room (perhaps for mingling activities, or for getting students to come up and read or perform).

Diagonal: Keep the traditional rows but angle them a little so that they leave a large diagonal space in one corner at the front. This is another way of creating a little more working space at the front of the class.



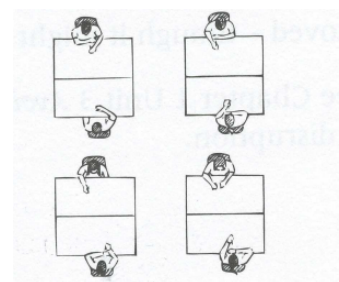
Reverse: If there is enough space in your room, try putting the tables behind the chairs. This means that students can face you without the intervening barrier. When they need to write at length or have another need for the tables, they can simply turn their chairs round and work with their backs to the teacher.

No tables: or try working groups without any tables. You'll find that this frees up a lot of space in the room, which you can then exploit for speaking activities, games, simulations and so on.



⁵ SCRIVENER, J. Classroom Management Techniques, Cambridge University Press 2012

Facing: Turn desks to face each other rather than all facing the front.



Islands: Group learners round tables. Learners can work closely together with others but can also get up and visit other groups without difficulty.

Change focus: For one or two lessons when you will not need to use the board much, ask the learners to move their seats (and possibly desks) to change the whole focus of the class to face the side or the back of the room. This is arguable a case of “change for change’s sake”, but sometimes a new view can also change how people think, speak and react.

Small Groups

Teaching small groups has become popular especially among adult learners. It is worth bearing in mind that many adults who choose to study English will be coming to classes when they have finished work, or over a lunch break. It is therefore essential to ensure that lessons are challenging but that you are not too demanding. Adults often have a specific purpose for wanting to study and like to take charge of their learning. Many adults will have had a very traditional style of education so may need to adjust to more contemporary methods of language teaching. Be prepared to potentially work with more [advanced ESL students](https://www.gooverseas.com/blog/tips-for-teaching-english-abroad-in-small-groups) if they have studied the language for quite some time.⁶

Given the fact that a majority of adult language education is delivered by language schools at their premises or as in-company classes, small groups are preferred and, in fact, the prevalence of small and middle-sized groups is given by the circumstances.

There is not a “magical number which would distinguish a small group from a big one. In the Slovak context an overall estimation is that a small group may be that with maximum 5 - 7 students.

Research has shown that learning in small groups improves academic achievement, relationship with classmates and promotes psychological well-being. As for the academic achievement, students are better at solving problems and develop a deeper understanding of the material when working in groups. Regardless of the subject, students learn more and retain material longer in small-group learning than when the same content is presented in other instructional practices. With respect to social skills that students develop, students develop better social and leadership skills such as learning how to draw out reluctant speakers, handle people who dominate the conversation and making sure that all members contribute. As for the psychological aspect,

⁶ <https://www.gooverseas.com/blog/tips-for-teaching-english-abroad-in-small-groups>

small-group learning helps draw people out who normally would not participate in front of the whole class.⁷

As every way or formal organization of teaching, teaching and learning in small groups brings advantages and challenges.

Advantages of teaching small groups

Comfort: Teachers and students often feel more comfortable when the class size is smaller. Students generally feel more comfortable voicing their questions and opinions.

Students' needs met: Teachers can design customized lessons to meet the needs and interests of all of the class members.

Student centred: Teaching is student centred and often more communicative than is possible in large classes. Students also have more opportunity to speak.

Space: Students have plenty of space to move around in the classroom. Teachers can also arrange excursions (or suggest spontaneous ones) outside of the classroom where students can be exposed to real world English.

Attendance: Class attendance is usually high because students know they will be missed if they are absent. They also feel like they belong to the group.

Tasks Completed: Assignments and homework are more likely to be completed because the teacher is more likely to check.

Preparation time: Less preparation time is required for photocopying. There are generally enough textbooks to go around so photocopying is limited to extra activities.

Detailed Feedback: Teachers have time to provide detailed feedback when marking assignments and tests, so students get a better sense of how they are improving and where they need to work harder. Teachers also have more time to answer questions before, during, and after class

Challenges of teaching small groups

Timing: Activities finish quickly, so teachers may need to prepare more activities and games.

Distractions: Pairs can get distracted easily since they can hear what others are saying.

Attendance: If a few students do miss a class, planned lessons can occasionally flop. For example, you may plan a lesson that requires pair work, and then find that only three of your six students come to class.

Fillers: Teachers must always have plenty of fillers on hand for times when lessons or activities get completed quickly.

Boredom: Students may become bored working with the same pairs or groupings all of the time. There may also be less energy in the room in a small class.

Anxiety: While you will likely feel more comfortable teaching in a small class, shy students who are used to blending into a large class may be uncomfortable participating. You will have to take special measures to help them gain confidence.

⁷ <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Academic%20Dean%27s%20Office/Guide%20to%20Small-Group%20Learning.pdf>

Activities not always suitable: Some activities in textbooks, such as debates or role-playing, may not be possible if a class is very small. You will have to spend some preparation time adapting textbook activities.

Strategies for coping with challenges in small groups

Fillers: Always have plenty of fillers (such as puzzles and games) ready in case activities finish quickly. Keep a list of [games or warm ups](#) on hand to use when energy gets low. Some may need to be adapted slightly if the class is very small.

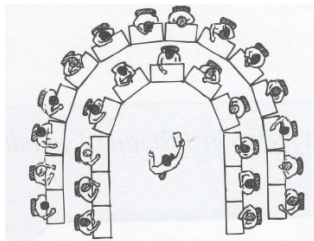
Review often: Take the time to make sure that your students understand the lessons and material.

Encourage confidence: Help shy students to feel more comfortable by trying not to put them on the spot. Let them get comfortable with you and their classmates before you start calling on them to speak up more. Remember to praise them often and save criticism for private interviews.

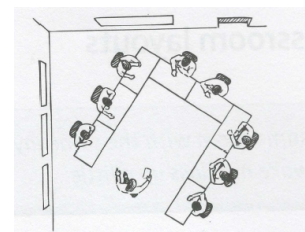
Change the dynamics: Invite students from other classes in once in a while. If you have high level students pair them with lower level students and give them the opportunity to teach.

Ask for feedback: Take time to find out whether or not students are happy with the class. Ask for suggestions regarding activities they want to do or skills they would like to improve. Put a question box or envelope out so that students can remain anonymous if they want to.⁸

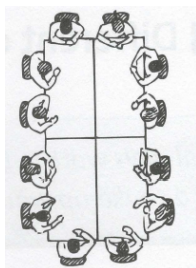
Like the large-group teaching, small-group teaching also has some preferred classroom layouts as introduced by Skrivener in his Classroom management techniques.



Semi-circle or U: This allows learners to make eye contact and communicate with each other. There can be a number of rows if needed.



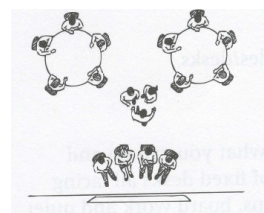
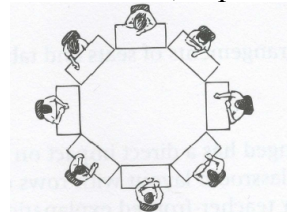
Tipped U: In reducing the rigid right angles of most classrooms, this can feel more informal, yet still provide desk space. A variation is to widen out the angle of the arms.



One large table: Pull the table together to form a large table and sit learners round it. This may increase the feeling of cooperating together on a single task.

⁸ <https://www.englishclub.com/teaching-tips/teaching-small-classes.htm>

Zones: if you have the luxury of a large enough classroom and there are square chairs, you can arrange different areas within the room – a line of seats up front facing the board, others around tables at the back of the room, a shared open-discussion / mingling area in the middle. During certain stages of a lesson students may be able to move from zone to zone, depending on what they need to do.



Full circle: This is a very democratic arrangement allowing everyone to see everyone else. Notice the learners' expectation that you will sit in the frontmost seat. Try sitting somewhere off-centre and notice what difference it makes to attitudes and interaction.

Teaching one to one

Teaching students individually (one-to-one classes) comes very popular in adult learning, particularly because most of the adult teaching and learning is organized in companies. Undoubtedly, individual classes are marked by some specific features.

Classroom management does not seem required in one-to-one classes, yet there are some discussions to make on where to sit, how to manage your physical resources, etc.⁹

The following part relies on the information about teaching one-to-one classes presented on Cambridge teacher training website.

One to one brings both advantages and disadvantages, stemming from the specific nature of the class as well as specificity of tailored content.

Among others, the following **advantages** may be observed in one-to-one ELT class:

One practical advantage (for both students and teachers) is flexibility. Dates and times of lessons can be adjusted to suit individual schedules. The informality of one-to-one lessons is also an advantage as it can be less stressful than group teaching and often less time-consuming with regard to lesson planning and homework marking.

In terms of teaching methodology, you have the opportunity to get to know your student and create lessons that are suited to their individual needs and preferences. You can collaborate more, encouraging the student to take an active role in their learning and become more self-directed. You can also be more flexible by responding to language points as they come up, even though they weren't necessarily in your lesson plan. It's also fun and easy to arrange *field trip* lessons by going shopping together or visiting a museum or library or, in the case of online teaching, visiting a website.

In these kinds of settings, students can build their confidence quite quickly, often resulting in rapid progress over the first few meetings. One of the most enjoyable aspects of one-to-one

⁹ <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-one-one>

teaching is seeing how quickly language progress can be made through natural communication in an informal setting.¹⁰

On the other hand, the same specific nature of this type of teaching and learning may bring a number of disadvantages. Among others, the following could be listed:

One practical disadvantage is that you may have to travel a lot from one lesson to another. In addition, some investment of time may be needed in advertising and finding students. Another practical problem can be when students cancel lessons unexpectedly, or don't show up. Access to print materials may also be restricted (a Smartphone or a laptop with Internet access is a big plus). In addition, one-to-one teachers usually work on their own and this means that they aren't able to exchange ideas with other teachers or engage in reflective professional talk that is such an important aspect of teacher development. Group teaching offers many opportunities to vary the interaction style, such as pair work and group work. However, one-to-one teaching is more of a challenge to find ways of keeping the lessons varied and interesting. In addition, many teachers say that one-to-one lessons are exhausting because you are constantly interacting with your student. Another challenge is maintaining motivation. After initial progress over the first few lessons, students may feel that they have reached a plateau. Their progress is less obvious to them because they don't have other students to compare themselves with. Learner expectations are another important factor. Some students are reluctant to talk, while others love talking, but hate being corrected! The one-to-one teacher needs to draw out shy students and handle feedback sensitively. It can be difficult to establish realistic goals and there are sometimes personality clashes too.

One-to-one strategies and approaches

As I have mentioned above, many of the tools used with a large group are adaptable to a one to one class, but the methods or aims may change. Other techniques are more suitable precisely because of the one-teacher – one-learner dynamics. Below are some recommendations:

Discuss your learner's needs and get agreement: It is very important that you know exactly what the learner wants from the class. Agree on a list of priorities. Later you may find that their needs are different – this too needs to be discussed.

Explain what you are doing and why: A one to one class is a great opportunity to explain why you do the things you do. Tell your learner your aims and how the work you are doing supports them, for example when you set homework or correct speaking. Encourage your learner to ask questions.

Be very flexible: You will need to be flexible over time, lesson and course aims, and material. Be ready to change if your learner asks you too.

Try a range of methods and techniques: Much of what you do in group classes will work with one learner – try it. For example, songs, games, chants, pair work, jigsaw listening and reading may all be applicable – with participation from you.

Set your limits: One to one classes can become very intimate. Decide how far you want to go. Humanising your class can be productive but don't get into personal areas that make you or your learner uncomfortable.

Give feedback: Find a range of methods for giving feedback to your learner. You can for example use immediate feedback when they are speaking, or a hot sheet, or just keep data for another class. Spend time working on errors – they are a great opportunity to make substantial improvements.

¹⁰ <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/Images/525581-teaching-one-to-one-part-1.pdf>

Use homework to support learning: Learners like homework, it adds value, and teachers often forget how good it can be. Use homework to get your learner to do things you wouldn't in the class, for example extended writing, research or more controlled practice.

Push your learner: Without the dynamism of a large group it is easy to lose sight of this, especially if your learner likes to talk a lot. Take advantage of the dynamic to push your learner – with the language you use, for example, or when correcting.

Know when to stop: One to one classes can go on for a very long period of time indeed, especially if you form a close relationship, but you should constantly evaluate the progress of your learner, albeit informally. There may come a point where you feel that a group would be a better place for your learner to be.¹¹

Questions:

1. What are the three most common forms of teaching adult learners? (Briefly describe each of the forms).
2. What factors should a good learning environment comprise?
3. Comment on grouping of students in “large groups” focus on the 3 types of grouping.
4. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of teaching large groups?
5. name and describe some of the typical classroom layouts in a “large group” classroom.
6. Characterize small groups. What are some of the possible advantages and disadvantages of teaching small groups?
7. What some of the strategies of coping with small classes (small groups)?
8. name and describe some of the classroom layouts in a “small group” classroom.
9. Briefly characterize teaching one-to-one. What are possible advantages and disadvantages of teaching one-to-one?
10. What are some possible strategies and approaches in teaching one-to-one?

¹¹ <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-one-one>