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How to teach English as a Second Language to large classes of small children

The teaching methods for English for small children will primarily aim to develop the children's oral / aural skills. It can be very difficult to design and teach English lessons using oral / aural methods for large classes (40-60 students), with minimal teaching aids available, and limited dedicated class time (30 minutes or less). Discipline, and being able to give each student the attention they need, are just two of the challenges teachers face in these situations.

Here are ten strategies to overcome these challenges:

1. At the start of the lesson give the children clear rules of behaviour, and signals that they must follow during the activity, e.g. a signal for them to form into groups or come together.
2. Get the children to work in small groups or even pairs. Put more advanced students together so that they can work on their own and allow you to focus on the less advanced students.
Alternatively, mix the groups so that the stronger students in a group can assist the others.
3. Appoint group leaders to assist you in managing the class.
4. If you have limited resources, instead of trying to provide every student with a book or other resource, share the resources amongst the groups.
5. Alternatively allow the groups to use resources in turn. Those groups without a resource can do another activity or lesson based around the same theme e.g. colours.
6. Once you have 3-4 activities for a particular topic such as numbers, set up a learning centre where each group does each activity in sequence. That way they don't get bored and you can make good use of limited resources.
7. To minimise the noise level, have some groups working in the classroom and others doing a different activity outside.
8. Introduce a game or activity in one lesson with the whole class. Then next lesson, break the class into groups, with each group doing the activity. Bring the class together at the end of the lesson.
9. If possible, give the students a project to work on in groups that requires some work outside class and spans multiple lessons. The children can settle to their project work as soon as the class commences.

10. If possible, involve older students or parents as teacher's aid to help you quickly organise the activity. If their English is strong enough they may also assist in conducting the full lesson. However, make sure that the lesson is taught predominantly in English.

Now let's look at a couple of lessons from the PIMD syllabus and see how these strategies could be used :

Grade 1 – Unit 1 – Lesson 2

Lesson 2		
Introduction	Core Lesson	Recapitulation
Introduce children to the phrases "What is your name?" and "My name is"	<p>Make up a song where the children sit in a circle and the teacher asks "What is your name?"</p> <p>The child next to the teacher replies "My name is".</p> <p>The song goes around the circle until all the students have asked the question and replied to it.</p>	Children are given a blank piece of paper with "My name is" written up the top in English and Tamil. They draw a picture of themselves on the paper.

This lesson requires the teacher to teach the song, explain the activity and then carry out the activity – all in twenty-three minutes. In a large class such a simple song could become boring for the children, they may become distracted and even disruptive. Here are some alternatives using the strategies above :

- Teach the whole class the song and then demonstrate with one group.
- Break the class into groups and ask each group to do the song activity. If your class is in a hall it might be a good idea to conduct this lesson outside so that the children can sit in circles at some distance from each other and away from the other classes in the hall.
- Make the drawing part of the lesson homework which the children can present in another lesson.

Grade 1 – Unit 6 – Lesson 4

Lesson 4		
Introduction	Core Lesson	Recapitulation
Collect pictures of animals and discuss the names of the different animals, written and displayed around the room in Tamil and English.	<p>The teacher and students should work on some descriptive words for the animals. Keep it simple and restricted to just a few, e.g. big small, fat, skinny, tall, short. Students can group the animals together into groups that fit the descriptive words they have come up with.</p> <p>Students may work with the whole class for 10 minutes on this activity and then work in groups with the remaining pictures.</p>	Students should present the groups that they worked on in groups to the whole class.

As a teacher in a remote village school you may not have access to enough pictures of animals to do this lesson as planned. For example you will need multiple big animals, multiple small animals, multiple fat animals, etc. Here is a suggested way to work around this problem :

- Break the class into groups. Have one group work with the pictures that you have.
- The other groups can be asked to make a list of animals which fit a certain description. For example, one group may be asked to name big animals, another group may be asked to name hairy animals, and so on.
- Instead of each group presenting to the class, you can go round to each group and check their list of animals.
- As the group with the pictures finishes, check their work and pass the pictures to the next group or, show the class the first group's work and ask the class to correct any mistakes as a group.

Grade 2 – Unit 3 – Lesson 5

Lesson 5		
Introduction	Core Lesson	Recapitulation
Teacher models telling the story of his/her time line for the day.	Students are broken into groups to tell the story of their time lines.	Willing students may want to tell their stories in front of the whole class.

This lesson could take some time even if the students work in groups. In a group of 10 each student will need time to talk about their day. The recapitulation in this lesson is important for evaluating students' progress in general. Here is an alternative way to conduct this lesson :

- Instead of breaking the class into groups, call for volunteers. The children will tend to repeat each other so ask each volunteer to describe a different part of the day, e.g. morning, afternoon, before school, after school.
- Alternatively, break the class into groups with each group focusing on a different part of the day and ask the group to discuss what they do at that time of the day rather than each child in turn telling her/his story. Then call for volunteers from each group.

Grade 2 – Unit 6 – Lesson 3

Lesson 3		
Introduction	Core Lesson	Recapitulation
Teacher takes students on a nature trail excursion around the classroom, playground, or nearby area.	Students follow the teacher around. Teacher points to or holds up items from nature (some new, some already learned) and asks "What is it" Describing words can be introduced at any stage, such as size, shape, colour, plurals.	On return, students are put into groups of 4 or 5 and asked to remember 1 or 2 items each from the nature trail. Teacher goes from group to group listening, then asks some children to tell their remembered items to the class.

This lesson cannot be accomplished in twenty-thirty minutes. Here are some alternatives :

- At the end of the nature trail, retrace your steps and ask the children to point out the items that they have been shown.
- Do the nature trail walk during a lunch hour and then do the group work in the next lesson.
- Do the nature trail walk in one lesson and ask students to draw at least one item for homework. They can present their drawing to their group in the next lesson and the group can add descriptive words to the picture.

PIMD is a non-government organisation working in the education and ICT fields in developing countries, helping to build sustainable village communities. Contact info@microdevpartners.org for further information