

## The challenges and opportunities of creating an effective lesson at tertiary level

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**Abstract:** *Any teacher, beginner or experienced, wants to teach an effective and successful lesson. The notion of effective teaching is rather difficult: two teachers can teach the same lesson, but differently, and both lessons can be effective. This article deals with some principles which can make a lesson effective, such as lesson management, lesson structure, students' motivation to study, and class size. This research into students' attitude to class size covers four groups from academic year 2016-2017 (faculty of linguistics at the National Research University Higher School of Economics – NRU HSE), six groups from academic year 2017-2018 (faculty of linguistics), and four groups from academic year 2017-2018 (International College of Economics and Finance – ICEF). Students' replies to the question of whether they like to study in large or small groups show that most students prefer to study in small groups; the standard number of students in a first-year class is 15, but in reality can exceed 20.*

**Keywords:** *Class size, Effective teaching, Lesson management, Lesson planning, Teaching pronunciation at tertiary level*

### INTRODUCTION

“The sociolinguistic reality of the world is that now bilingual English speakers have outnumbered native speakers of English” (Saud, 2020, p. 36). This situation owes something to a well-organised system of training of English teachers around the world. In order to become a language teacher (at school or university) in Russia, one must complete a university course. Once the course is completed, teachers are expected to demonstrate an ability to put into practice what they have learned, and teach effectively. Professionalism in teaching is determined by standards that “serve as a common frame of reference for talking about teaching and learning” (Katz and Snow, 2009, p. 72). The authors outline a set of competences for an effective teacher, and ways to assess these competences. A competent and effective teacher must be aware that his or her qualification matches the standards and needs of learners.

Apart from the above-mentioned requirements, some other competences can be included, for example, emotional competence:

...how well you control emotions such as frustration and anger ... and do not treat students arrogantly, insensitively, or patronisingly, your behaviour in and out classroom including your use of language, your dress

code, your sensitivity to cultural diversity in the classroom. (Richards & Farrell, 2013, p. 73).

These factors reflect the respect a teacher shows for students. Therefore, if one shares these competences, he or she becomes a professional. This principle holds true for a language teacher. A good language lesson reflects the specialised thinking and knowledge of an educated language teaching professional (Nunan and Lamb, 1996). The nature of specialised knowledge can vary depending on the kind of education the teacher received: a quick three-year retraining course or short teacher-training courses will never compare with a university course.

Some practical principles for working with different-sized classes, principles for creating an effective classroom learning environment, and various teaching techniques will be discussed in this article. The article will show how teachers' professional knowledge and skills can be used in this way at tertiary level.

## **TEACHING ASPECTS**

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### *Teachers' experience*

Pedagogical university graduates possess specialised knowledge, which must be used if they go on to teaching. This knowledge can vary depending on the speciality chosen by students: linguistics or pedagogy. Moreover, teachers within one speciality can use different teaching methods and principles which help them to realise their goals in a particular teaching context. Kumaravadivelu (1994, p. 32) proposes several principles which can be used as guidelines in teaching: (1) maximise learning opportunities; (2) facilitate negotiated interaction; (3) minimise perceptual mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation; (4) activate intuitive heuristics (for example, by providing enough textual data for learners to infer underlying grammatical rules); (5) foster language awareness; (6) contextualise linguistic input; (7) integrate language skill; (8) promote learner autonomy; (8) raise cultural consciousness; and (9) ensure social relevance.

These teaching principles can be used as guidelines in any context, but techniques for implementing them will vary from teacher to teacher; they will be using their own materials and assessment strategies appropriate for the course they teach, unless they work under constraints of a particular school, college or university which has adopted certain competences students must obtain at the end of the course. The key to success in building up an effective lesson could be such aspects as a teacher's knowledge and experience, with an emphasis on the latter because a thoughtful teacher can analyse and use experience, negative or positive, as a basis for further development. For example, pedagogical university graduates have little or no teaching experience, but they understand which methods will work or not in the classroom, since they are so close in age to their students. Younger teachers should also work in collaboration with competent, honest, enthusiastic and experienced teachers who will provide them with adequate instructions on the adopted methodology of the teaching programme and teaching materials.

***Lesson management***

Lesson planning in general adds to lesson effectiveness and success. Various scholars have their own understanding of what planning a lesson means. According to Woodward (2005, p. 1), planning “includes the following: considering the students, thinking of the content, materials and activities that could go into a course or lesson; ... cutting things out of magazines and anything else that you feel will help you to teach well, and the students to learn a lot”. Then, Richards believes that a lesson plan reflects goals, activities, sequencing, timing, grouping, and resources (2015, p. 178). Activities which a teacher plans to use in a classroom to a large extent depend on the course taught and the outcomes. For instance, the aim of the practical phonetics course at the NRU HSE is identified as “mastering of the British accent and creating a pronunciation base for further development of students’ accurate speech” (practical phonetics programme for first-year students, 2017, p. 1). The course objectives are: “formation of students’ basic understanding of British accent and phonetic styles, articulation of sounds and intonation patterns (contours), and acquisition of knowledge and obtaining skills of monologuing and dialoguing in English” (p. 1). As a result of mastery of this discipline, students must know the articulatory base of the English language as compared to the Russian language, rules of articulation of vowels and consonants, syllable formation and sentence stress, basic contours and their function, rules of delimitation “tonality”, according to Wells (2007, p. 6), and placement of pauses and also intonational styles of English. (p.6)

Activities, depending on the goal of a particular lesson, will include explanation of articulation, drilling English sounds in short and long words and phrases, reading phonetic texts (dialogues) and playing phonetic games. Some younger teachers will spend part of the lesson on tongue-twisters and crosswords. A teacher can spend around 20 minutes on the explanation of intonation issues and intoning phrases and sentences. Timing is key to an effective and fruitful lesson: sounds – 15 min, phonetic dialogues – 15 min, phonetic text – 15 min, intonation – 20 min, games or songs – 10 min, spontaneous dialogues – 15 min. There is a list of books teachers can use in the lessons, but any teacher will add supplementary materials which can be developed individually.

Classroom management refers to creating “a positive environment for learning” (Richards & Farrell, 2013, p. 76). Every teacher has an understanding of what it means. Senior (2006) thinks that it can be created by friendly and approachable teachers using humour for an informal class atmosphere while discussing common interests and concerns (cited in Richards & Farrell, 2013, p. 107). This can be treated as a two-sided issue: on the one hand, the university environment is academic, and students study for knowledge and results; on the other hand, first-year students are former school leavers who are adjusting themselves to new learning conditions; some of them did well at school and feel discouraged if they cannot acquire proper sounds or intonation patterns, to say nothing of their graphic representation. To facilitate students’ process of learning, a teacher can vary whole-class teaching and pair (group) work. In pronunciation classes most learning takes place with all students either together or individually. For instance, reading phonetic exercises all together, and then individually to better identify misarticulation. It is similar in the reading of phonetic texts: pair work is more

relevant for reading phonetic dialogues or making spontaneous dialogues. This teaching “algorithm” helps to focus students’ attention on the learning task and to set an explicit and quick tempo of work. Moreover, the whole activity is under a teacher’s control; individual work defers to class work in such a lesson due to time management. Group work in this respect will interfere with the dynamics of the classroom.

### ***Lesson planning and lesson structure***

Planning a lesson is considered an essential part of teaching for both less experienced and more experienced teachers. Scholars (Richards, 2015, p. 175; Woodward, 2005, pp. 3-4) agree that this takes longer for younger teachers than older ones. Experienced teachers usually prepare less detailed lesson plans and “often teach from a mental plan, rather than a detailed written lesson plan” (Richards, 1998, cited in Richards, 2015, p. 175). For any teacher a plan builds confidence, and provides security, timing and a record of activities and skills taught. According to Richard-Amato (2009), the structure of a lesson is determined in three stages: openings, sequencing, and closings (cited in Richards & Farrell, 2013, pp. 77-81). The opening phase serves to focus students’ attention on the aims of the lesson, to make links with previous learning, to arouse interest in the lesson, and to activate background knowledge (p. 78). Applying this to a pronunciation lesson, the opening could aim at working on a sound introduced in the previous lesson. The sequencing phase would be devoted to the introduction of, for example, [ɪ] sound, explanation of its articulation, and drilling it in chorus and then individually, reading words, word combinations and short meaningful phrases containing this sound. This can be followed by simple dialogues with the sound [ɪ] from the book ‘Ship or Sheep’ and, finally, by practising graphic representation of short sentences with this sound on the board. Students can be asked to make spontaneous dialogues based on phrases with the sound [ɪ]. All students are involved in the above-listed activities. The closing phase summarises what students have achieved and learnt and suggests follow-up activities for the next lesson (for example, working on the next sound [i:] and the next phonetic dialogue, more intoning, singing songs and making more spontaneous dialogues. All of this can provide students with new language experience, correct language use – with correction of mistakes in the articulation of sounds – and new language skills.

### ***Students’ motivation to learn***

“Motivation refers to the learner’s attitude, desire, interest and willingness to invest effort to learning a second language” (Richards, 2015, p. 149). It is usually associated with the time and effort students need to expend in order to obtain the required skills. Some students are highly motivated due to their interest in language and culture, and in the process of learning. Others have a practical need for a foreign language for their future career. A third group of learners may like a good atmosphere in the classroom, among their friends, and they look forward to such classes; a teacher with a positive personality, good relationships with fellow students, singing songs and playing word games can add to students’ motivation. There will always be students in every group who would like to take part in the phonetics contest at the end of the academic year; winners are excused from the

final practical phonetics exam, and five or six students who also do well at the contest are excused from the artistic reading aspect of the exam.

Scholars assume that motivation is dynamic and fluctuates according to contextual factors. Dörnyei (2001, p. 23) proposes a model of motivation that has three aspects: creating motivation, which is associated with goals, plans and ways of reaching the goal; maintaining motivation, linked to managing tasks and activities in order to preserve students' interest; and reviewing motivation, which concerns evaluation and plans for the future. In relation to teaching pronunciation, first-year students can set themselves high goals of obtaining the native speakers' accent, and this can finally be frustrating at the end of the course. The pronunciation teacher should focus on short-term goals of achieving attainable targets; maintaining interest can be based on small, visible successes, and results in accurate and proper articulation of sounds. Students must be encouraged to achieve small goals over the whole academic year, and can be praised. A thoughtful teacher will finish every lesson telling the students what they have learnt that day and what skills they have obtained.

## **ADDITIONAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

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Teaching can be affected by factors other than those listed above – for instance, the type of institution at which the teacher works. Teaching at a primary or secondary school, at evening classes or at a university, will be different. Each has its inner constraints, purposes and practices. They will have their own adopted programmes and attitudes.

### ***Type of class organisation***

The speciality programme in the linguistics faculty of the NRU HSE is organised so that students are taught both English and methods of teaching. The English language programme in the first year devotes quite a number of hours to practical phonetics, speech practice and grammar. The largest input is in speech practice, with general and academic skills development and grammar. Practical phonetics takes up only two hours per week, with an equal number of hours for self-study. The reason for this is twofold: firstly, it is difficult to find experienced teachers who belong to a particular phonetic school; secondly, the attitude of students to the way they sound has changed nowadays. Some say they prefer the American accent, even though the British accent is taught at the university, and both cannot be taught. On the other hand, with the mainstream tendency for democratisation of speech, many students tend not to adopt the native speakers' accent of either southern or northern regions of Britain, but reduce their pronunciation efforts to the approximate norm of received pronunciation, plus estuary English. They find this up-to-date and appropriate. Self-study usually involves working with recordings, intoning and preparing for the year-end phonetics contest, which is both challenging and beneficial.

### ***Class type***

University students mostly form a homogeneous class in respect to age and language level, due to successfully passed school exams, but the rest of the features

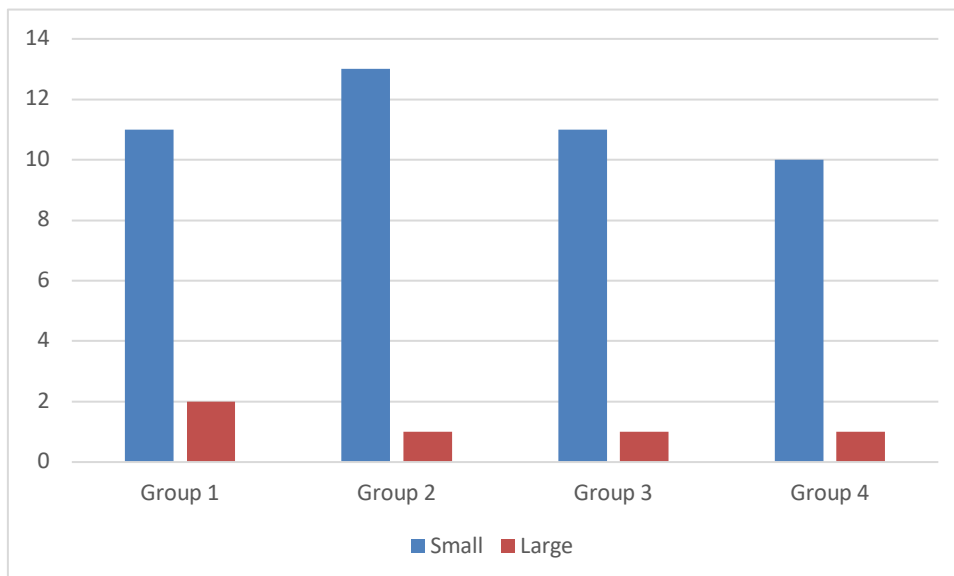
are different: sex, background, mother tongue (since they come from various areas of Russia), personality and learning style. This is a reality that teachers anywhere in the world have to put up with. All these features make planning and conducting such classes difficult because students have their own expectations and requirements, pace of learning and interest in the subject. According to Woodward (2005, pp. 214-215), the teacher should focus on syllabus and content. The author suggests activities in reference to classes teaching reading, for example, preparing one syllabus for everyone in the class, plus an optional extended syllabus. Students can choose which syllabus they follow. "If you are working with minimum and optional syllabuses ... you'll need ... to keep track of who's doing what in class and what goals students have set themselves" (p. 214). Another principle, recommended by this author, is using different materials and tasks. It is important that more advanced students should not feel that they are wasting time, and the less advanced should not feel "small". Marking criteria can also be modified for stronger and weaker groups of students if they are grouped to carry out tasks according to a language level principle (p. 217).

### *Class size (analysis and results)*

Class size is a challenging issue for many teachers in various teaching environments. For example, in Pakistan, "the ideal number of students" in one class is considered to be 30 students, even though the real number can substantially exceed it (Moghal et al., 2020, p. 1). The usual number of students in language groups at the NRU HSE varies from 15 to 25-30, depending on whether it is a class in practical discipline or a theoretical seminar. Classes in practical phonetics basically comprise not more than 15 students. This number is considered appropriate. In some groups, where the second foreign language is Chinese (which is getting more popular), the number of students in one language can reach 20. A survey was conducted at two faculties of the NRU HSE: linguistics (practical phonetics classes) and the ICEF (academic skills development classes). Data collection was performed using the research method of questionnaire, because this involves no pressure, and the answers are written down for further analysis (Rogers and Willoughby, 2013, p. 35). It was also assumed that students do not differ very much in cultural background, age or social class, and have their own understanding of the issues. The number of questions was limited to one open question to which students could say what they wanted, could express their opinion, and justify it. The question for both categories of students was as follows:

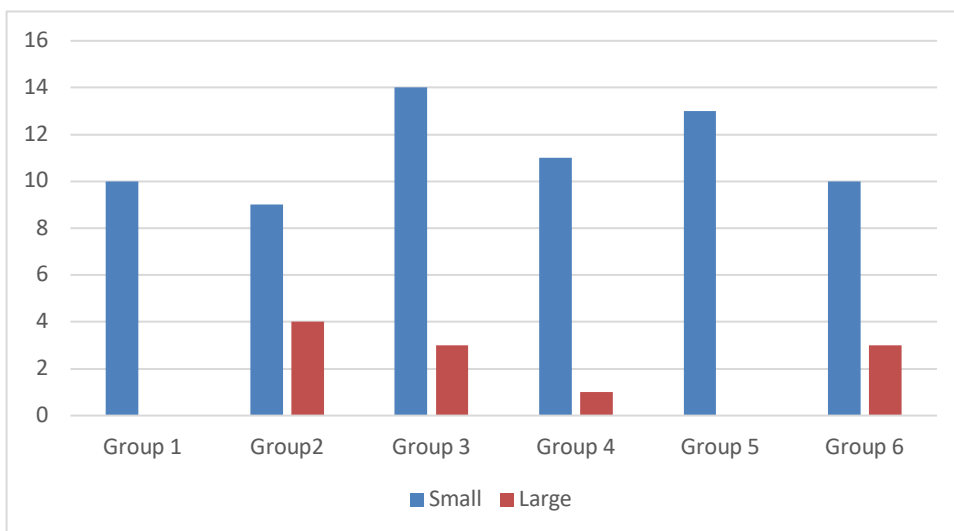
*Would you like to study in a large or small class (number of students)? Give your reasons.*

Four groups of first-year students of linguistics from the 2016-2017 academic year – 50 in total – took part in the survey; six groups from 2017-2018 (78 students); four groups of ICEF students from 2017-2018 (52). The results of this survey are shown in Figures 1-3.



**Figure 1.** *Faculty of linguistics students' responses (academic year 2016-2017)*

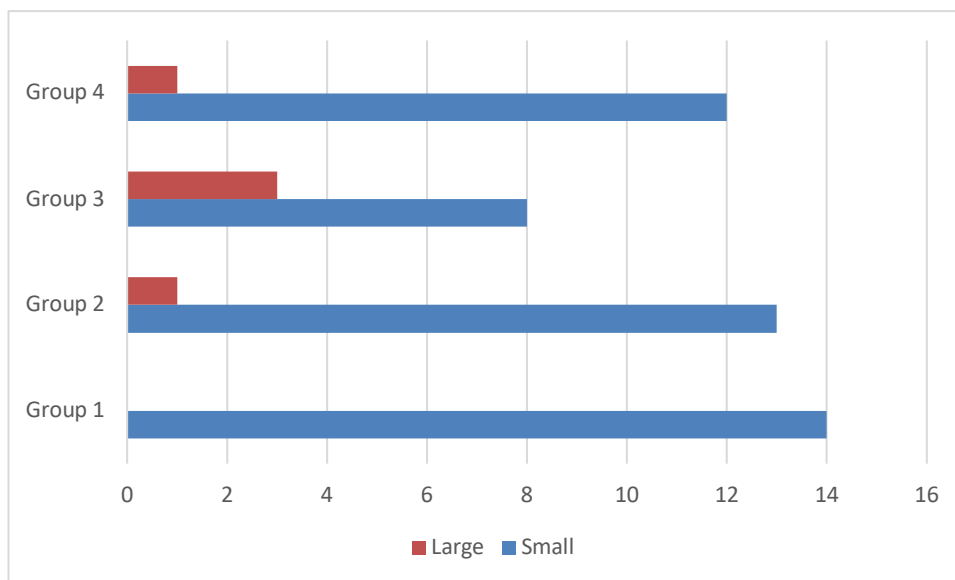
As can be seen from the data in Figure 1, most of the linguistics students from academic year 2016-2017 preferred to study in small groups. The arguments for this were: students get more individual attention from the teacher; they practise spoken language; they are more productive and efficient; it is possible to realise their potential; it is easier for shy students to develop. Five students from the four groups supported the idea of studying in large classes giving their reasons as: large classes are associated with large rooms, which makes them airy; large classes give more opportunities to develop and carry out pair work and group work.



**Figure 2.** *Faculty of linguistics students' responses (academic year 2017-2018)*

The majority of students of linguistics students from academic year 2017-2018 (Figure 2) also supported the idea of small classes versus large classes because

smaller classes provide better understanding and a chance for a student to ask a question; small classes are less noisy, so it is easier to concentrate; small classes are more enjoyable and exciting; the relationship with the teacher is warmer; they are also good for lazy students who skip classes and then try to catch up with the others. From this group, 11 students supported the idea of large classes because: large classes make teaching and studying more dynamic and faster; they provide competition and a chance to mix up with the others. They also believe that large classes offer a diversity of opinions, and a sense of companionship and team spirit.



**Figure 3.** ICEF students' responses (academic year 2017-2018)

According to Figure 3, only five first-year ICEF students from 2017-2018 decided that large classes were more appropriate for them; they saw them as less formal, and better for developing speaking skills; while 47 ICEF students believed that small classes are more beneficial for learning languages because they are closer to individual classes and make it possible to understand the material better.

Authors propose practical principles for teaching large classes. For example, regarding crowd control and group work, Woodward (2005, pp. 218-220) thinks it important to: learn all the names of students; use clear eye contact with individuals; not raise the voice trying to speak louder but, instead, use either a hands-up technique, tap on the board or ring a small bell; keep students involved from the start of the lesson creating a working atmosphere (p. 218). For group work Woodward recommends creating interesting and clear tasks, giving instructions and time warnings, and assigning roles to each member of the group. It is also important to plan checking in advance, and to evaluate not only the language used by students but also the content, and assess how well students work together (pp. 219-220). All of these techniques can improve students' oral performance.



## PRINCIPLES OF MAKING AN ENGLISH LESSON MORE EFFECTIVE

### *Creating the right classroom environment*

Some scholars (Richards & Farrell, 2013, p. 107) see the classroom climate as “the affective” side of the classroom – that is, the feelings the students have towards the lesson, the teacher and other students, and the learning atmosphere. Students’ positive view of the class very much depends on whether they are interested in what is taught, whether it meets their expectations, and the teacher’s style of teaching. Some NRU HSE students realise by the end of their first year that they have chosen the wrong faculty; as a result, they demonstrate no interest in the subject and skip classes. Teaching style is very important for shy and less confident students. But every student appreciates a charismatic, friendly and knowledgeable teacher. A teacher’s enthusiasm can add to a good impression of, and attitude to, the subject and materials used. Teaching practice shows that a dynamic class in practical phonetics, with entertaining activities (for instance, singing a popular folk song together) at the end of the class can encourage students to attend classes and create a good classroom climate.

### *Pronunciation assessment*

The importance of pronunciation in communication cannot be denied. For a native speaker, a person’s pronunciation is a marker of social class, age, gender and regional and educational background. A person’s pronunciation (accent) is the first thing which any interlocutor notices in conversation. Richards (2015, p. 336) notes that many second-language users of English aim to learn how to speak it with an accent close to or indistinguishable from native speakers of English. Others feel comfortable speaking English with an accent that reflects features of their first language, for example, Chinese, German or Russian. The author believes that language learners can choose themselves which accent to acquire – British, Australian or mother-tongue-influenced pronunciation, which is probably impossible within a university programme where the focus is usually on only one particular accent. In order to measure the pronunciation ability of speakers of English, a phonological control scale was introduced over the first five levels of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference): A1-C1 (there is no descriptor for C2). The full scale is represented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *The CEFR phonological control scale (Adopted from Harding, 2017, p. 16)*

| No. | Journal  |
|-----|--|
| C1  | Can vary intonation and place sentence stress correctly in order to express finer shades of meaning.   |
| B2  | Has acquired a clear, natural, pronunciation and intonation.   |
| B1  | Pronunciation is clearly intelligible even if a foreign accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur.  |
| A2  | Pronunciation is generally clear enough to be understood despite a noticeable foreign accent, but conversational partners will need to ask for repetition from time to time. |

|    |   |
|----|---|
| A1 | Pronunciation is of a very limited repertoire of learnt words, and phrases can be understood with some effort by native speakers used to dealing with speakers of his/her language group. |
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As can be seen from the table, the scale provides clear descriptors of pronunciation ability (not speaking ability) which concern both sounds and intonation use.

### ***Basic teaching techniques in practical phonetics***

Teaching pronunciation at the faculty of linguistics at the NRU HSE is carried out in the first-year practical phonetics course. It concerns sounds, intonation, stress, and rhythm. Students are also introduced to phonostylistics, the science of speech styles. The focus of the teacher's activity in the classroom is on articulation: explanation of articulation and correction of possible mistakes. The most difficult issues in this work are those sounds which are similar or different in English. They are, firstly, aspirated [p], [t], [k]. There are no aspirated sounds in Russian, so students need to have aspiration explained to them. Secondly, [m] and [b] are more energetic in English, and in the articulation of [f] and [v] sounds the upper teeth should be in the middle of the lower lip. Thirdly, the articulation of [l] and [r] sounds is different, too: to produce the [l] sound one must place the tip of the tongue on the alveolar ridge (not on the upper teeth as in Russian); [r] in English is post-alveolar, and in Russian, rolled. [θ] and [ð] sounds are the biggest difficulty because in the production of no Russian sound is the tip of the tongue placed between the upper and lower teeth. This seems to be the reason why many students substitute for these sounds [s], [z] and even [f] and [v]. Vowel sounds are articulated in a different way from Russian: in the English production of the [ɪ] sound, the tip of the tongue is in the middle position, while in Russian, it is in the high position. There is no issue of vowel length in Russian and there are no diphthongs. The final difficulty is tenseness in English sounds.

All these articulation differences are explained to students in the first year, since pronunciation is not part of the secondary school programme, especially in the final two years, when pupils start preparing for the state unified exams. The usual techniques for practising and drilling English sounds are special phonetic exercises from the course book, and additional exercises prepared by the teacher and students themselves, containing words and word combinations with particular sounds. In practising word stress, similar techniques can be used: the teacher prepares a list of one-syllable, two-syllable and multi-syllable words. In order to understand word-stress issues better, the teacher can use the sound "da" for stressed words and "di" for weak ones. For instance, "cat" – "da", "cattle" – "da" "di", "catalogue" – "da" "di" "di", or just transcribe the words (Baker and Westrup, 2000, p. 86). For understanding of sentence stress, the teacher provides students with information on intonation contours or intonation patterns and types of terminal tones (low (mid) fall, high fall, low (mid) rise, high rise, fall-rise, rise-fall, rise-fall-rise, mid-level tone). All of this knowledge students pick up from the basic course book *Practical Phonetics of the English Language* prepared by teachers from Moscow Pedagogical State University (Sokolova et al., 1997) and books by J.C. Wells (Wells, 2007) and A. Cruttenden (Cruttenden, 1997). The most difficult terminal tone for Russian learners to master is low fall since it is seldom used in

Russian. Students usually substitute it with mid fall, which is more common. To acquire a proper intonation pattern, students are recommended to use a small ball which they can drop as they utter words, simple word combinations or phrases with low fall; for example: “yes”, “no”, “I know it”. Basically, it works and makes the lesson and drilling of intonation contours less boring. All of the above-mentioned techniques in teaching practical phonetics can work even in large classes if there is no issue of discipline and attendance is regular. On the other hand, it causes extra work for teachers.

## CONCLUSION

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Teaching an effective lesson is a dream of any teacher. With a hundred per cent effort on both sides, the teacher and the students, it can come true. This research has shown that in order to achieve this goal, several aspects must be taken into consideration: knowledge and experience of the teacher; materials and course books; classroom management; lesson planning and lesson structure; and students’ motivation to learn. Class size can be a challenging issue, and requires thorough planning and monitoring, creating a friendly environment (with maybe even treats like singing folk songs). Pronunciation assessment should be an important principle disseminated by all teachers. Teaching techniques are chosen by a teacher but should be in line with the programme of teaching this discipline at the university. This research is limited to the analysis of the effectiveness of first-year students, although they are from two different faculties. Further research could look into the effectiveness of classes in the second and third years. These results can be of practical value to teachers of other aspects, such as grammar or speech practice since they all form one discipline – a practical course in a first foreign language.

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