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Teaching large classes in difficult circumstances

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Teaching large classes in difficult circumstances

Fauzia Shamim and Kuchah Kuchah

Introduction

The phenomenon of large classes in mainstream primary, secondary and higher education has been discussed for more than a century now, particularly in well-resourced contexts. However, discussion of large classes is now becoming increasingly noticeable within the literature of ELT, mainly for the following reasons:

1. The phenomenal spread of English around the globe (Graddol, 2006; Copland et al., 2014).
2. The demand for quality teaching (Buckingham, 2003; UNESCO, 2005). Quality teaching is normally found to be a challenge in large classes.
3. The promotion of communicative language teaching (see Thornbury, this volume), with its focus on student-student interaction for increased language learning opportunities within the ESL/EFL classrooms, and the challenges in organising and managing ‘interactive’ teaching for a large number of students.
4. The ‘education for all’ movement, which has led to increased enrollments at the primary level without a concomitant increase in resources, particularly in developing countries (see O’Sullivan, 2006; Nakabugo, 2008; Sawamura and Sifuna, 2008; Kuchah, 2013; see also Enever, this volume, for discussion of primary ELT).

In addition to the phenomenon of large classes, there is also increasing evidence in the ELT literature, from a variety of educational contexts in the world, which indicates that a large proportion of teaching-learning of English takes place in ‘difficult circumstances’ (West, 1960; Maley, 2001; Benbow et al., 2007). This, unfortunately, has not been given sufficient attention in the discourse of language pedagogy. The focus in this chapter will therefore be on teaching English in large classes in difficult circumstances. We begin by defining the two key terms: ‘large classes’ and ‘difficult circumstances’. In the next section, we outline the major issues surrounding teaching English in large classes within the kind of difficult circumstances we describe. This is followed by a brief discussion of ways of developing good practice in large classes, including the role of teacher education programmes and teacher research. Next, contemporary policy debates on class
size are presented and their implications for decisions about class size discussed. Finally, recommendations are made for future directions in pedagogy for and research into large classes.

What is a ‘large class’?

To date, there is no agreement on what constitutes a ‘large class’. Large classes have been defined in various ways by teachers (and researchers) working in similar and different contexts. For example, large classes were defined as comprising 22–25 students in K–3 classes (8–9 years old) in an influential class size study in North America (Finn and Achilles, 1990). However, 25 students is considered a small class by teachers in developing countries. For example, in Pakistan, large classes may comprise 40–100 students in state secondary schools and 200 or more students at the tertiary level (Shamim, 1993; Sarwar, 2001; Buglio, 2012); in Cameroon, a large class could comprise 235 students in a secondary school (Kuchah and Smith, 2011); in Bangladesh, up to 150 students (Emery, 2013); and in Syria, large classes of 400+ students have been reported at the university level (Ajjan, 2012).

The varying perspectives of teachers regarding class size also makes it difficult to define large classes in terms of a single numerical value. Research evidence indicates that in order to fully understand the phenomenon of large classes, we need to look beyond mere numbers into other relevant contextual factors such as the teachers’ previous experience of class size, the average class size in their context (Coleman, 1989), limited classroom space and/or inadequate provision of resources for the number of students present in a class and the teachers’ teaching style (Shamim, 1993). Hence, the definition of large classes is more a matter of teachers’ threshold levels (Shamim, op. cit.: 143–144) and other contextual factors than simply the number of students present in a class (Ajjan, 2012; Kuchah, 2013).

Yet while there is no universal definition of a large class, there seems to be a general agreement that 40 or more students in a class can pose a number of challenges for effective teaching and learning (see Watson-Todd, 2006), particularly in ‘difficult circumstances’. This will be the working definition of a large class in this chapter.

What are difficult circumstances?

The issue of difficult circumstances in ELT was first brought to light by West (1960) in his book *Teaching English in difficult circumstances*. West drew attention to ELT challenges in classrooms consisting of “over 30 pupils (more usually 40 or even 50), congested on benches . . ., ill-graded, with a teacher who perhaps does not speak English well . . ., working in a hot climate” (p. 1). Difficult circumstances include, but may not be limited to, insufficient and/or outdated textbooks, crowded classrooms with limited space, and lack of adequate resources and facilities for teaching-learning, including ICT. These difficult circumstances are compounded, particularly in resource poor environments, if the teachers do not have adequate English language and/or pedagogical skills, as is evident in the following description of teaching English in large classes at a university in Pakistan:

On the one hand, there is a lack of infrastructure; on the other hand, teachers are poorly trained in language teaching. There is a lack of resources, a lack of suitable furniture for language teaching, and an absence of visual aids. Although there is a change in the syllabus from being literature-oriented to language-oriented, the implementation of this syllabus is still a problem as teachers are less motivated to change their teaching methods due to a lack of required training. . . . Reluctance to introduce any change is also due to the sociocultural
Teaching large classes

influences on the teaching. Teachers transfer knowledge rather than sharing it. Therefore, teachers consider that changing teaching methods is difficult because of the learners’ traditional orientation and behaviour for classroom learning.

(Bughio, 2012: 135)

Needless to say, the challenges of teaching large classes increase manifold in these difficult circumstances. (Some contextual variables that have been found to interact with class size will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.)

Main issues in teaching large classes

In this section, first, we outline a problem-oriented perspective on large class teaching and the solutions often proposed for these problems. Then, we problematise this problem–solution approach to developing an effective pedagogy for large classes, using the illustrative example of group work – a proposed solution found in the literature – to argue for the need to develop context-appropriate methodological principles and practices for large classes, i.e. pedagogies which take account of all the contextual variables including the difficult circumstances. Finally, we discuss how large class sizes might interact with other variables in language teaching and learning.

A ‘problems and solutions’ approach to large class teaching

Recent surveys of the existing literature on large class teaching show that it mainly focuses on problems in large classes and suggested ‘solutions’ (Shamim, 2012; Anmpalagan et al., 2012). Anmpalagan et al. summarised ten major challenges identified by practitioners in teaching English in large classes and their suggested responses to address these difficulties (see Table 37.1).

A closer look at Table 37.1 indicates that teachers’ reported problems in large classes pertain to classroom management, including managing pair and group work and students’ on-task behaviour; interactional and affective factors such as getting to know the students; assessment and feedback; and limited resources. Some of these problems are related to other difficult circumstances such as the physical aspects of the classroom and mixed-ability classes; a few stem from the teachers’ desire to promote active learning with the large class (for further discussion of these issues, see the section on ‘Large classes and other variables’ later in the chapter).

As Table 37.1 shows, the teachers’ responses to problems in teaching English in large classes focus mainly on developing ‘solutions’ to discrete problems, such as the teacher raising her hand to get the students’ attention when they are working in pairs or groups (also see Shamim et al., 2007).

Pedagogical solutions to deal with large classes have also been suggested by ELT methodologists. For example, Ur (2012: 276–279) provides a list of solutions to problems of discipline, assessment, suitable materials, participation and individual awareness posed by large heterogeneous classes. These include collaborative learning through peer teaching; individualisation of learning through student selected materials; and personalisation of tasks to allow for individual responses based on learners’ own experience, opinions and imagination, as well as varying between compulsory and optional activities for each student and using open-ended cues to generate free discussion. She argues, for example, that varying topics, methods and texts, as well as making activities interesting, can solve problems of discipline in such classes. Hess’ (2001) book dedicated entirely to teaching large multilevel classes suggests a series of activities for achieving key solutions to large class problems. These solutions include knowing students, motivating and activating students, maintaining interest and momentum, dealing with written work, effective
group work, individualising and personalising student work, and making students responsible for their own learning as well as establishing classroom routines and procedures. More recently, Akoue et al. (2015) have also put together a list of activities for dealing with the challenges of classroom management, individual differences, student reticence, and assessment that large classes with minimal resources may pose. Amongst other things, these solutions include providing a variety of activities, appropriate pacing of content, developing collaborative learning, personalisation of content and the establishment of classroom routines.

**Problematising the ‘problems-solutions’ approach**

The suggestions and ‘solutions’ to large class teaching outlined above are mainly ‘teaching tips’, however, and although they may be relevant to teachers for teaching a large class on a Monday morning, there is hardly any critical discussion of their use, particularly in large classes that take place in difficult circumstances. Furthermore, most of these solutions represent ‘best practices’ in ELT more generally, i.e. desirable for teaching English effectively irrespective of class size. Moreover, as these ‘solutions’ have been developed mainly in small class contexts in BANA contexts (i.e. communicative language teaching-oriented, mainly Western private sector ELT (Holliday, 1994); see also Holliday, this volume), they pose problems when applied in large classes in difficult circumstances.

To illustrate this point, let us critically examine one suggestion for large class teaching that abounds in the literature, that is, group work (e.g. Sarwar, 2001; Smith, 2001, 2003; Shamim et al., 2007). It is believed that teachers who use group work appropriately in large classes are able to maintain an appropriate working agenda by empowering students to support each other in smaller groups, thus minimising the risk of student non-participation that is often associated with large class teaching. However, the practical challenges in some low income countries – such

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Possible response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 ‘I have too much homework to mark. It is impossible to give effective feedback to everyone.’</td>
<td>Use peer feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ‘Not all students participate due to being in a large class.’</td>
<td>Introduce or increase pair/group work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 ‘It is difficult to get students’ attention to stop them working on a pair or group task.’</td>
<td>Raise your (i.e. the teacher’s) hand and train students to do the same.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 ‘The noise level in my class is too high.’</td>
<td>Establish a code of behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 ‘Students in a large class often have mixed abilities. It is difficult to cater for students with such different levels and needs.’</td>
<td>Get written feedback from students about lessons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 ‘It is difficult to achieve rapport with the students.’</td>
<td>Increase your availability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 ‘Students’ individual responses are difficult to hear.’</td>
<td>Ask other students to repeat or paraphrase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 ‘It is difficult to promote active learning in large classes when resources such as textbooks, flash cards are limited.’</td>
<td>Enlist students’ help in gathering material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 ‘It is difficult to know/use students’ names in a large class.’</td>
<td>Have students make profile cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 ‘I am sometimes in despair at my inability to manage a large class.’</td>
<td>Discuss difficulties more with other teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
as physical space in the classroom, limited resources and time constraints – impose on teachers the further constraint of working in extremely crowded classrooms where group work might not be a contextually appropriate practice. This is evident in the following interview excerpt from a large class teacher in Pakistan:

Teachers have lack of resource [sic], lack of space to arrange group activities as the number of students is high and classes are not big enough to arrange group activities. And shortage of timing is also another problem to complete the activity.

(Bughio, 2012: 126)

Keeping this in mind, Harmer (2009) makes a case for teacher-fronted pedagogic practices that engage learners intellectually and verbally. He argues that teacher-fronted lessons do not necessarily imply student passiveness. In large class contexts, teachers and learners can actually benefit from teacher-controlled activities when such activities require students to be actively engaged in thinking about language and meaning. When teachers make use of activities that attract the interest and attention of learners, and demand both individual and pair responses to tasks, class size ceases to be an issue. This perspective chimes with research findings (e.g. Ajjan, 2012; Kuchah, 2013) which reveal that in very large class contexts where organising group work may be practically impossible, students tend to value activities that engage them intellectually. In other words, for these students, “being mentally engaged is as important a criterion of successful teaching as being kept verbally active” (Ajjan, 2012: 270). It seems therefore that for large classes, classroom interaction needs to be redefined to take into consideration cognitively engaging activities which may not necessarily involve extended verbal exchanges.

Large classes and other variables in teaching and learning

Large classes often interact with and upon other teaching-learning variables in a given context (Shamim, 1993). Accordingly, problems in teaching English in a large class can be exacerbated by a host of other variables in the context. In this section, we discuss three variables in particular. These are heterogeneous or mixed-ability classes, the culture of teaching-learning, and learner and teacher preferences.

Heterogeneous classes

Large classes are often heterogeneous. Thus, the problem of a large class is compounded due to a large number of learners of differing abilities in the class. This “[d]iversity among students confuses and puts too much pressure on their teachers leaving them mentally and physically exhausted” (Bahanshal, 2013). To address the problem of large heterogeneous classes, Naidu and her colleagues (1992) undertook classroom-centred research in a higher education setting in India and came up with what, according to them, were culturally acceptable ‘solutions’, such as involving learners in developing reading comprehension questions for their peers for the prescribed texts. As discussed in a later section of this chapter, the value of teachers’ active engagement in research in the setting of their own classrooms is vital for effective teaching in their large classes.

The culture of teaching and learning

The culture of teaching and learning in an educational setting, such as established teacher-learner roles, as well as the cultural norms of interaction in the wider community, can impact on what
Fauzia Shamim and Kuchah Kuchah

happens in the classroom irrespective of class size (Shamim, 1993; Coleman, 1996). In most ELT literature, it is suggested that learner-centred teaching, often associated with smaller classrooms, may potentially be able to provide more learning opportunities and can be realised by employing various classroom management and interaction strategies such as pair and group work. However, this is often not the case in educational settings where the local culture, regardless of class size, may not be amenable to using a learner-centred approach in general and pair/group work in particular (see for example, Li, 1998; Bawazeer, 2013). This is often the case in low-resource contexts where the teacher is the only source of language input. In such classrooms, where the teacher is considered the ‘fountain of all knowledge’ and a ‘guru’, pair/group work may be seen as preventing time for necessary language input; large class sizes add to the difficulties of introducing a culture change and, more importantly, new roles and responsibilities for teachers and learners in the classroom (Buglio, 2012). As will be discussed shortly, this may necessitate using context appropriate strategies (Holliday, 1994), including teacher-centred pedagogy, to maximise learning in large classes.

Learner and teacher preferences

Learners and teachers may also have their own preferences for ways of teaching and learning. Khati’s study (2010) of learner preferences in large multilevel secondary school classes in Nepal indicated that the students prefer to be called by their first names in the class. At the same time, they liked to engage in challenging activities and preferred their teachers to do additional activities outside the textbook. However, as mentioned earlier, teachers, particularly if they are teaching more than one large class at a time, find it difficult to learn the names of all their students. More importantly, on the one hand, not knowing their learners individually can be stressful for teachers; on the other, it is likely to demotivate the learners who want to be recognised as individuals in their large class.

A recent global survey of the challenges faced by primary ELT teachers (Copland et al., 2014) revealed that although large classes were a predominant issue, there were contextual variations in teachers’ perceptions about the role of small classes in improving the quality of teaching and learning. The study revealed that:

In the UAE, where most classes are relatively small (20+), it [small class size] was ranked first. In contrast, in Colombia, where classes are generally large (30+), and in Tanzania, where they are very large (40+), smaller classes are not judged as important as many other factors. This finding illustrates the complex interplay of local realities and educational norms where notions of acceptable classroom behaviour and classroom roles may vary.

(Copland et al., 2014:13)

As noted above, this necessitates developing context appropriate strategies after a careful analysis of all local variables, thus recognising and addressing the potential threats and capitalising on the positive aspects of a context, to maximise opportunities for teaching and learning in large classes (Holliday, 1994; Kuchah and Smith, 2011).

Developing good practice in large class teaching

Developing context-appropriate methodology

In this section, we examine a proposal for developing context-appropriate methodology for teaching large classes. This proposal is different from the simplistic ‘problem-solution’ approach
Teaching large classes

discussed above in three main ways: it is based on a careful analysis of all the variables in teaching large classes in difficult circumstances as well as available research in the field; it represents a contextually appropriate response to the challenges of large class teaching; and it attempts to establish some principles for the practice of teaching English in large classes.

As early as 1960, Michael West made a case for pedagogic practices which encouraged students in large classes in difficult circumstances to be more involved in developing their own learning. Central to his argument was the point that the larger and less well-resourced a class, the more important it is to help students to be able to learn for themselves. Recent developments in the field of learner autonomy, in the classroom as well as in out-of-class settings, are revealing insights about the value of autonomy-related practices for large class contexts where other difficult circumstances are present (see Benson, this volume, for further discussion of learner autonomy). Although the literature on learner autonomy in developing countries, where the majority of large classes are taught, is unfortunately very sparse, there are significant voices from these contexts (e.g. Sarwar, 2001; Fonseka, 2003; Kuchah and Smith, 2011) which point to learner autonomy as a way ahead for large and under-resourced classrooms.

For example, the following vignette from an overcrowded classroom in Cameroon offers a glimpse of a teacher’s (Kuchah, this chapter’s second author) initial dilemma in teaching large classes in difficult circumstances, which in this case included few textbooks and temperatures of up to 46 degrees Celsius and sets the basis for the autonomy-related practice he later developed with his students:

It was clear to him [the teacher] from the very first day that all the group and pair work language activities he had envisaged were not going to work, and that he needed to think seriously about how to go about things. His wonderful ideas about communicative language teaching and his interactive activities certainly seemed to have their place elsewhere! Observing his other colleagues, teachers of history, science, and so on, Kuchah discovered that they basically dictated notes that students copied, and gave a few explanations in the process. He reflected that dictating notes would certainly not work for him, given that English was a foreign language to these students. A way out seemed to be to resort to a teacher-centred practice focusing more on grammar and vocabulary, providing rules and giving practice exercises from the textbook.

(Kuchah and Smith, 2011: 121)

Kuchah’s initial response to teaching a large class of 235 adolescents in a remote part of Cameroon was based on ‘survival’ instincts. Subsequently, he sought to re-negotiate learning goals and learning activities with his learners to experiment with a ‘new’ pedagogy – the pedagogy of autonomy – for increased learner engagement through the sharing of resources and responsibility for learning between the learners and the teacher. This included the teacher encouraging students to reflect and find answers to questions related to what they wanted to achieve from each lesson, how they intended to go about achieving mutually agreed objectives, and where they could find learning resources to meet their objectives (for details, see Kuchah and Smith, 2011).

The literature on learner autonomy (e.g. Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Dam, 2008; Benson, this volume) encourages pedagogic practices that aim at enabling students to be responsible for their own learning. This includes helping them to take decisions about the goals, content, process and assessment of learning, both collectively and individually. As was argued by West (1960) and also demonstrated in the work of Fonseka (2003), Sarwar (2001) and Kuchah and Smith (2011), encouraging learners in large under-resourced classrooms to take control of various aspects of their learning may be a way of helping them develop a sense of ownership of the learning process.
and self-regulating their learning. There is ample evidence from these studies showing that when teachers share responsibility for teaching and learning with students, the latter are able to facilitate learning, thus dissipating many of the challenges of difficult circumstances.

While it must be said that problems of lack of space and infrastructure are largely dependent on stakeholders other than the teacher, it cannot be denied that the interactional and affective relationships within the classroom rest on teachers’ shoulders and, by extension, on the nature of the training/education that prepares teachers for contexts in which large classes and other difficulties are the norm. In what follows, we look at ways in which teacher education can better prepare teachers to deal with the challenges of their working contexts in English language teaching and learning in difficult circumstances with large classes.

The role of teacher education programmes

Recent developments in ELT have seen a growing demand for research that recognises both teacher and student agency as an important part of the generation of good practice, especially in difficult circumstances where teachers and learners need to re-negotiate learning goals to meet the limited resources available to them (e.g. Smith, 2011). It is also incumbent on teacher educators to pay attention to social aspects of classroom learning (Wedell and Lamb, 2013) in terms of how teachers can develop positive rapport with language learners, especially in large class contexts where such personal connections between teacher and students may not be easy to establish on a one-to-one basis. In this regard, Kuchah’s (2013) study specifically incorporated a teacher development component into the research design – based on what Kuchah himself terms an ‘enhancement approach’ – which consisted of workshop discussions with groups of teachers watching videos of lessons taught and selected as successful by their peers and identifying the positives (rather than the negatives) of these lessons. Discussions of each videoed lesson were further enriched and extended with insights from students’ perspectives of good ELT practice in the context of their large classes. The findings of this study reinforce the claim that teachers are more likely to accept pedagogic innovation when it is seen to emanate from, or be endorsed by, their peers rather than when it is imposed on them by external ‘experts’ and/or policy makers (Kao et al., 2013).

Garet et al. (2001) have argued that sustained and intensive professional development which focuses on academic subject matter (content), gives teachers opportunities for ‘hands-on’ work (active learning) and is integrated into the daily life of the school (coherence) is more likely to have an impact on teachers’ learning and practice than is shorter professional development in the form of one-off workshops (see also Johnson, this volume, for further discussion of language teacher education). Unfortunately, in most mainstream educational institutions in the developing world where large classes exist, teachers and even educational authorities can hardly afford time for sustained professional development opportunities, as these may keep the few available teachers away from their classrooms. This is even more the case in mainstream primary schools where teachers are general subject rather than (specifically) English teachers and where the absence of a teacher from class means that nothing is learned. In this regard, a pilot Teacher Association research project has been developed between the Cameroon ELT Association (CAMELTA) and the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) Research Special Interest Group (ReSIG) to explore the potential contribution of teacher association research to teacher education (see Smith and Kuchah, 2014); the aim is to help teachers generate pedagogic knowledge, principles and practices which are appropriate to their specific contexts (Kuchah, 2013).
Supporting teacher research

The social construction of good practices involving teachers, as opposed to the handing down of recommended practices, is now being encouraged in some tertiary learning contexts. This has resulted in the mapping of research concepts like action research (Burns, 2010) and exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003, 2005; Allwright and Hanks, 2009), which legitimise teachers’ knowledge and highlight the importance of reflective inquiry into the experiences of teachers as mechanisms for change in classroom practice (Lieberman, 1995; Johnson, 2006). Accordingly, there is a growing interest in identifying ways to facilitate teacher research in language teaching, both in teacher education programmes and in teachers’ everyday life and work contexts (Borg, 2013; Borg and Sanchez, 2015; Smith et al., 2015).

As we have shown earlier, there are suggested solutions in the literature for dealing with large classes, mainly based on ideas promoted by expert handbooks and guides. Yet the dearth of research on the effectiveness of strategies for large class teaching is noticeable. However, recently, there have attempts by individual teachers and researchers to undertake and/or support action research in large classes. For example, Khurram (forthcoming) found, through action research in her large university classes in Pakistan, that learner motivation and involvement in large ESL classes could be improved by using techniques that engage the learners both affectively and cognitively. Meanwhile, Bughio (2012) worked as teacher-collaborator with a group of volunteer teachers at a university in Pakistan. The major aims were to increase meaningful classroom interaction by introducing group work and developing learner responsibility for self and peer learning. A learner-centred methodology was introduced for this purpose after a careful analysis of the variables that were found to affect teaching-learning of English in the large classes in that context, including factors outside the control of the teacher such as the physical structure of the classrooms. This indicates that action research and exploratory practice by teachers acting as researchers offer us the chance to investigate and support large class teaching in sustainable, localised and ‘bottom-up’ ways.

However, a major issue that needs further research and discussion is how to ensure continuity of teacher research once the support from the researcher/project is withdrawn, particularly in difficult circumstances.

From classroom practice to policy: does class size actually matter?

Having examined the practice of teachers in large classes and discussed ways in which teachers might develop successful classroom practices, we now return to two key contemporary debates in large class teaching, research and policy, both in difficult circumstances and well-resourced contexts. They are: whether small classes are better than large classes, particularly in terms of learner achievement, and, where resources are limited, what are the alternatives to reducing class size? These are questions that are arguably the domain of policy and policy makers rather than teachers (generally, teachers cannot affect class size; policy makers can). In this section, we will discuss these issues using the available research evidence.

Are small classes better than large classes?

The relative merits of small classes compared to large classes still forms an important part of teacher discourse. However, the majority of studies focusing on the relationship between class size and achievement and also class size and non-achievement variables, such as classroom processes, have been conducted in North America and Europe (see for example, Finn and Achilles, 1990;
Fauzia Shamim and Kuchah Kuchah

Blatchford, 2012) – contexts that are vastly different from those that characterise the teaching-learning of large classes in difficult circumstances. Hence, the findings of these studies cannot be applied to developing country contexts, which are the focus of this chapter. This is because, among other things, what is considered a large class in well-resourced contexts is considered to be either a small or a ‘normal’ size class in the developing countries (Coleman, 1989, and also as we have seen in this discussion).

Interestingly, while large classes are a reality for many teachers in difficult circumstances, there is a dearth of research on class size effects in these contexts. One example is Michaelowa’s (2001) study of pedagogic practices and learning outcomes in five francophone sub-Saharan African countries. The study findings revealed that even an increase in class size above 62 students in a classroom only modestly affected learning. Similarly, O’Sullivan (2006) found examples of good practice in large primary classes of more than 70 children in Uganda, thereby suggesting that effective teaching of large classes is possible even in difficult circumstances, as we have suggested in this chapter.

Alternatives to reducing class size: policy options

Asadullah (2005) studied the effects of class size on achievement in Bangladesh using national secondary school survey data. Based on the findings, which did not show any beneficial effects of smaller classes, he concluded that “reduction in class size is not efficacious in a developing country like Bangladesh” (p. 220). Interestingly, despite contextual differences, this resonates with the findings of meta-analyses of many influential studies conducted in other developing world contexts as well as in the USA, where Hanushek (1995, 1998) showed that there is no significant difference in learning outcomes between smaller and larger classes.

This has led to suggestions that discussions about the effects of class size on teaching and learning in general may be less relevant than discussions about teacher effectiveness or improving teachers’ pedagogic practices in relation to their particular context. Buckingham (2003: 71) argues strongly that:

- class size has less effect when teachers are competent; and the single most important influence on student achievement is teacher quality. Research shows unequivocally that it is far more valuable, both in education and fiscal terms, to have good teachers than lots of teachers.

Buckingham’s argument supports conclusions from previous studies by Staasz and Stecher (2000) and Stecher and Bohrnstedt (2000) that teacher quality is the most important variable for effective teaching-learning in a classroom.

This body of evidence brings to the fore the need for alternative ways of addressing the issue of large classes and other difficult circumstances. Based on these perspectives, this chapter has therefore argued for a bottom-up approach to teacher education which recognises the important role of both teacher and student agency in generating appropriate and effective language teaching practices in large class contexts.

Conclusion

Research into the affective and interactional potential and possibilities of English language teaching and learning in difficult circumstances is still very sparse despite the growing demand for English language education and the ever rising number of students in classrooms around...
Teaching large classes

the developing world. Future developments in this area will therefore need to build around a research agenda which not only looks at the constraints posed by such contexts but also at the potential for such contexts to enhance quality learning. Bottom-up research which considers class size as an important socio-cultural variable (Locastro, 2001), and promotes an enhancement approach (Kuchah, 2013) which takes on board the classroom experiences and practices of both students and teachers, may provide insights into the social dynamics of large classes.

Moreover, professional development opportunities have to take into account the critical importance of teachers’ working contexts and promote teacher creativity and the building of craft knowledge (Lieberman, 1995). Additionally, teacher education for large class contexts needs to develop a curriculum which emphasises creativity and pedagogic inventiveness and encourages trainees to reflect on their day-to-day practices, aligning these with learner needs, abilities and expectations. This requires training teachers in ways of developing a ‘pedagogy for autonomy’ but also encouraging ‘pedagogies of autonomy’ that reflect teachers’ pragmatic responses to their contextual challenges rather than practices imposed on teachers from powerful outsiders to their classroom realities. What is more, the discourse of learner-centredness needs to consider learner perspectives (Ajjan, 2012; Kuchah and Pinter, 2012; Kuchah, 2013). Finally, research into learner agency needs to become an important part of teacher development, if we must bridge the gap between teaching agendas and learning agendas.

Yet fundamentally, the question remains: is class size a problem? Allwright (1989) asked this more than 25 years ago. He pointed out, rightly in our view, that it is both a pedagogical and a political question. Large classes will continue to be the reality for teachers and learners in many countries in the world. Usually, however, large classes are not highlighted as a problem in official figures and reports due to differences often found between government statistics based on overall student-teacher ratios and the number of students actually present in different classes (O’Sullivan, 2006). As a result, large classes are often an ‘invisible’ difficult circumstance (Coleman, forthcoming). More importantly, policy makers, even in developed countries, “want to know the most cost-effective means to achieving the desired outcome” (White, 2013: 4). In this regard, reducing class sizes is an expensive educational reform, with less than convincing evidence for its effect on student learning outcomes. This necessitates a shift in focus from researching effects of class size per se to developing appropriate approaches to large class teaching. More specifically, practitioners need to move away from the problem-solution approach, instead developing context-appropriate methodologies for large class teaching. The major challenge for practitioners, both teachers and teacher educators, is to develop teacher and teaching quality for increased student engagement and learning in large classes.

Discussion questions

• How would you define a ‘large class’? What is considered to be a ‘large class’ in your professional context?
• How might autonomy be introduced and developed in large classes? And how realistic is this in your professional context?
• To what extent do you think that teachers can undertake teacher research in their own, large class context? What support do they need in developing context-appropriate methodology?
• Should the focus of policy be on reducing class size or improving teaching quality? Which of these educational reforms might be most effective in improving learning outcomes in your professional context?
Fauzia Shamim and Kuchah Kuchah

Related topics

Appropriate methodology; Classroom talk, interaction and collaboration; Communicative language teaching in theory and practice; Language teacher education; Learner autonomy.

Further reading

Coleman, H. (1990) ‘The relationship between large class research and large class teaching’. SPLET Newsletter, 5/1. 2–9, reprinted (2015) in SPLET Quarterly Journal, 30/1. 2–10. (This paper provides a summary of teachers’ self-reported challenges in large class teaching and suggests some principles for improving practice in large classes.)


Kuchah, K. and Shamim, F (eds) (forthcoming) International perspectives on teaching English in difficult circumstances. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (This edited collection comprises a section on the policy, research and practice in teaching English in large classes in difficult circumstances.)

Online: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17501229.2011.577529 (This article discusses a contextually appropriate ‘pragmatic’ response of a large-class teacher in an under-resourced secondary school in Cameroon, and principles are derived for developing learner autonomy.)


References


Teaching large classes


539
Fauzia Shamim and Kuchah Kuchah


