

LANGUAGE TEACHING IN LARGE CLASSES

Nega Worku*

Abstract

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70%, and 100% sample size of the total population of the primary, secondary and tertiary level respondents, respectively.

The research showed that all the respondents were highly concerned about large classes. They said that large class teaching is actually different from language teaching in small classes. The 'largest' class which the secondary and primary school teachers regularly teach is 86; whereas the 'largest' class which the tertiary level teachers teach is 41. The 'least' experience of the respondents is not very far from their large experience: this indicated that they were teaching 'large' classes almost always.

The task based group teaching was found to be a partial solution to alleviate the problems of teaching in large classes.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

There are a number of factors that affect the teaching and learning process. Class size, per-se, is said to be one of the undeniable facts of school life that affects the educational process.

It is apparent that the teaching of English in large classes is becoming a global fact. Although, large classes are common in the least developed countries, even the highly developed countries have started to see in their schools the link between class size and pupil behaviour. "It is clearly the view of the majority of teachers that teaching smaller groups of pupils would reduce stress and make it easier for them to keep order in their classroom."¹

People could argue that "many classroom instruction studies postulate 'teacher as a supreme ruler' of discourse, and the description and analysis they contain are very much coloured by this view."² It is undeniable that, in large class language teaching, much of the classroom talk is conducted by the teacher. The teacher remains the central figure in the classroom. Under such

circumstances, "the teacher will be forced to lean on formal instruction rather than to involve the pupils ... in active classroom participation."³

Group activities are advantageous in large class teaching for a number of reasons. "Among the reasons cited for their use is that encourage students to work together and to help each other."⁴ " ... if the 'teaching spectacles' is to be abandoned, then a 'learning festival' must be instituted. In other words, it becomes necessary to put the participants-both teachers and students-into situations which will no longer be perceived as 'lessons' so that all who are involved can avoid falling back into the roles which are inextricably associated with the lesson format."⁵ Such innovations might give tremendous effects if properly utilized and fully accepted.

It is not surprising to view teachers "as the source of resistance to change."⁶ Educational changes are likely to be successful if teachers are willing to implement them. Otherwise, what happens is that the schools accept the resources but continue with the old practices.

Whatever method we use, it is the students who do the learning; it is the students who must use new ideas and experiences to restructure and reshape their mosaic. However, it is ridiculous to expect students to arrive without having travelled. On this account, the teacher is expected to work as a travelling agent by facilitating the necessary conditions.

It is vital to introduce to the students some metacognition (knowing about knowing). Learners may be particularly resistant to change if the change that is required of them runs counter to what is taking place elsewhere within the system. It is not an easy task to leave the burden on the shoulders of the students without proper assistance.

Purpose of the Study

The question of large classes is not only a national but also an international issue. Teachers in all parts of the world complain about large classes, though the degree varies. World-wide researches in this area have depicted the severity of the problem in developing countries in particular.

Under normal conditions, it is presumed that as the number of students increases, there is a tendency to increase the number of schools and teachers. However, this could not be the case, at least, in this part of the world. Economic constraints (scarcity of financial, material and human resources) and other factors put a limit on the number of teachers and classrooms. Consequently, large classes appear dominantly in the educational milieu.

A lot of teachers in this part of the world stipulate that they perceive class size as one of the stumbling-blocks in the teaching of English. Language teaching in large classes is a common phenomenon in many countries, Ethiopia being one of them. Yet it hasn't received due research attention. It is also obvious that a number of psychological and pedagogical regularities in addition to overcrowding have a great impact on the teaching of English in large classes. In language teaching, it is desirable to limit the number of students in order to give due attention to the individual learners.

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to hear griev-

ances and out cries among teachers, parents, students and educationists talking about large classes from various perspectives. In this research, the researcher has determined to investigate the problem from the teachers' perspective only.

The researcher has investigated some of the problems that are associated with large class teaching, including teachers' concern with large classes, the extent of the problem (just how large are large classes), attitude to large classes, and the methodological problems that are pertinent to large classes.

Research Methodology

In conducting this research, two types of questionnaires (originally prepared by Leeds-Lancaster Language Learning in Large Class Research Group) were slightly modified and distributed to two tertiary level institutions, six state-owned secondary schools and ten elementary schools. The first type of questionnaire (hereafter quantitative questionnaire) helped to collect quantitative data from the respondents, where as

the second type of questionnaire (hereafter qualitative questionnaire) has mainly designed to get the opinions and perceptions of the respondents.

The researcher applied a purposive sampling technique in choosing the type of institutions and respondents.

The research considered 14%, 70%, and 100% of the total population of the primary, secondary and tertiary level institutes. The total sample taken (19) represents 22% of the total number of institutes (86) in Asmara (Table 1). Of the total number of questionnaires distributed (173), 122(70.5%) were recollected, of which 74(60.6%) were valid responses (Table 2).

TABLE 1

Number of Institutes and Samples Taken

Level	No. of Institutes	Sample Taken	%
Tertiary	2	2	100
Secondary	10	7	70
Primary	74	10	14
Total	86	19	184

The total sample taken (19) represents 22% of the total number of institutes (86) in the city.

TABLE 2

Questionnaires Distributed and Collected

Code	Name of Institute	Questionnaires Distributed	Questionnaires Collected	Valid Responses*
1	Asmara University	11	11	5
2	Naval College	3	2	1
3	Asmara Sec. School	12	3	3
4	Barka Sec. School	8	8	5
5	Keihbahir Sec. School	15	10	5
6	Semenawi Sec. School	12	10	6
7	Yisak Sec. School	12	4	1
8	Zerai Sec. School	7	7	5
9	Abraha Elem. School	4	2	2
10	Adulis Elem. School	14	14	9
11	Agazian Elem. School	14	9	6
12	Edget Elem. School	18	5	3
13	Guræ Elem. School	4	3	1
14	Jegnoch Elem. School	16	16	8
15	Kidist M. Elem. School	2	2	2
16	Martin Luther School	4	4	4
17	Model Elem. School	8	6	4
18	Selam Elem. School	9	6	4
	Total	173	122	74
	%	100	70.5	60.6

*Valid responses are determined based on Coleman's criteria of Validity.

Limitations of the Study

The researcher attempted to look at the problem merely from teachers' perspective. He excluded the views of students and other concerned bodies. Furthermore, the researcher didn't try to study language teaching problems in large classes from English language skills teaching point of view but just from the view-point of teaching English in general.

In analysing the quantitative data, there was a tendency to reduce the many to the few, the complex to the simple, the various to the uniform. By so doing, a few important concepts could either be obscured or over-looked.

Though there is no avoiding the fact that the quantitative data is equally important to the qualitative data, time constraint has forced the researcher to focus on the major quantitative data alone.

Analysis and Interpretation of
Quantitative Responses

Typical Class Size

The 'largest' class which the secondary and primary level respondents regularly teach is 86; whereas the 'largest' class that the tertiary level respondents regularly teach is 41. The 'usual' class size which the secondary and primary level respondents regularly teach is twice as large as the 'usual' class size of the tertiary level respondents. The 'smallest' class size which is experienced by all levels is, more or less, identical with their usual class size experience. Infact, the class sizes are lower than the 'hearsay'. It is hard to believe that this could be a typical class size.

TABLE 3

Typical Class Size

Class Size	Tertiary level	Secondary Level	Primary level
Largest	25-41	40-86	49-86
Smallest	17-29	30-74	36-75
Usual	22-35	40-76	36-80

There is a big difference between the experiences of secondary and primary school teachers when compared to tertiary level teachers. What is said to be the 'largest' class size by the tertiary level respondents is regarded either as the 'smallest' or 'usual' class size by secondary and tertiary level respondents (Table 3). The secondary school respondents had equal shares with the primary teachers in the teaching of large classes. The tertiary level teachers, however, did not have much experience. In so far as the secondary and primary teachers perception of 'ideal' classes is concerned,

it is almost twice the size perceived by tertiary level teachers. The highest limit of the 'ideal' class of the tertiary level respondents is nearly the lowest limit of the secondary and primary level teachers (Table 4).

TABLE 4

Range of Perception

Class Size	Tertiary Level	Secondary Level	Primary Level
Ideal	15-25	25-50	24-58
Large	20-40	35-65	30-60
Too large	30-50	45-70	50-90
Small	10-15	12-40	0-40
Too small	01-09	05-30	0-30

What is perceived as 'uncomfortably large' and 'intolerably too large' by the tertiary level respondents is still within the range of 'ideal' class size for secondary and tertiary level respondents. According to the tertiary level

respondents, the large class problems begin within the range of 20-40. For the primary and secondary level respondents, it could go upto 60 and 65, respectively.

The problem becomes 'intolerably too large' when it reaches 30-50 for tertiary level teachers; whereas it could further go upto 70 and 90 for secondary and primary school teachers, respectively.

One could also observe that the highest limit of the 'intolerably too small' and 'uncomfortably small' classes of the primary level respondents is also equivalent to the lowest limit of the 'intolerably too large' classes of the tertiary level respondents.

Average Class Size

The mean of the actual 'largest' class size experience of all respondents from all levels is greater than the mean of the 'intolerably too large' class size perception of the same respondents. This indicates that the teachers are actually teaching classes which they consider as 'intolerably too large' (Table 5).

TABLE 5

Average Class Size of Primary, Secondary and
Tertiary Level Respondents

						Too		Too
	largest	Smallest	Usual	Ideal	large	large	Small	Small
Primary	69.50	57.65	63.28	39.28	54.23	68.65	18.88	11.42
Secondary	63.00	51.33	58.12	37.52	51.80	62.20	22.72	15.76
Tertiary	35.30	23.17	28.33	20.83	29.33	27.83	11.00	5.50

The 'usual' class size of the primary and secondary respondents is greater than the mean of the 'uncomfortably large' class size, a point at which problems begin. This also depicts the 'usual' threatening classroom situation which is crowded by a number of students.

Qualitative Responses

The qualitative questionnaire embraced six questions. All but the last one invited respondents to write as much as they could (see Appendix 1).

Class Size - The Facts

All primary, secondary and tertiary level respondents perceived language teaching in large classes to be different from language teaching in small classes.

It seems clear that all the respondents regarded class size as a problem since no one considered it as a 'no problem' area (Appendix 1). However, responses indicate that there is a variation in the severity of the problem from level to level.

The primary school respondents (25.4% and 61.2%) and the respondents from the secondary level (30% and 59%) regarded large classes as 'major problem' and 'one of the major problems', respectively. Here, the respondents shared the same kind of feeling with the primary school respondents regarding the severity of the problem.

The majority of the tertiary level respondents (69%) considered it as 'one of the major problems'; whereas nearly a third of the respondents (23%) regarded it as 'a problem but not a major one'. The

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remaining respondents (8% viewed large classes as 'a very minor problem'. As opposed to primary and secondary teachers, at tertiary level, teaching in large classes was not a 'major problem' (Appendix 2).

Restrictions on 'Individualized' Learning

There are two major restrictions as far as teaching English in large classes is concerned.

The first one is pertinent to the difficulties related to individual attention. A considerable number of the Asmara University and the Naval College respondents (25%) said that students in large classes, in general, don't get individual attention. Teachers also pay no special attention to students that are below average. Unlike in smaller classes, the teachers found it difficult to give due consideration to individual needs.

Secondary School Respondents (38%) perceived large classes as a hindrance to paying individual attention to each student. The respondents felt that they were unable to identify not only the students' problems but also the students themselves.

They were also unable to identify fast and slow learners. Respondents (33%) from all the six high schools found it very difficult to give individual assistance, such as: giving individual attention, inability to help slow learners and identifying students' abilities and shortcomings. The primary school respondents said that it was difficult to recognize each student's ability, problem, and attitude.

It was believed by many of the respondents that students had very little chance to participate. Even when students were given a chance to participate, the large class becomes a problem as many students lacked the confidence to speak when in a large group. It was also mentioned that practical exercises were absent. Large classes were further explained as a 'kind of closed market' where students' participation is virtually non-existent.

The second restriction is in relation to assessment and evaluation. According to some of the tertiary level respondents (49%), secondary level respondents (30%), and primary level respondents (33.4%); the inability to correct class work and homework made large class teaching look

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different. What were possible in small classes, say, giving and correcting a lot of assignments were found impossible in large classes. Consequently, the teachers were unable to evaluate the students properly. Follow-up was also difficult in large classes since the teachers couldn't regularly interact with every student. The respondents stated that checking each student's exercise book was a laborious task. It was also felt that asking questions, giving feedback to each student and observing the performance of every student demanded a great deal of work. They argued that the earmark of large classes was the fact that it made evaluation very difficult. There was also a feeling that, in forty minutes, in a class of forty or more, the teachers could not do what they hoped to do.

There were some 'minor concerns' with regard to large class teaching. A few of the tertiary level respondents (12%) were concerned about the inconvenience that could be created in developing skills. They said that it was unlikely for the teachers to develop important skills in large classes. Consequently, the classes remained a 'content teaching class' (teaching about the language) rather than teaching the language in use.

Still others (8%) were concerned about issues that could be put into one general category that comprises miscellaneous responses. Some of these responses are overlapping and/or unclassifiable. This category embraces a number points such as: shortage of time, inability to make the class attractive, inability to cover the subject, noise, loss of interest on both sides, load of the teacher, and inability to implement the lesson plans.

Implementation of Methodological Innovation

All concerned parties especially teachers and students should be consulted whenever attempts are made to implement methodological innovations.

Teachers, above all, should participate in the innovative process from the very outset. If it is imposed from outside, they either resist the innovation or accept the resources and continue with the old practices. Therefore such change should come from the teachers themselves. In response to an open question, "When I am teaching a large class, I help my students to learn English by ..." some of the respondents from the tertiary and primary level had attempted to introduce group work in order

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to alleviate the burden of large class teaching. This sounds a good start and it should be made clear that the teacher is still significant in preparing and clarifying objectives of the tasks that should be done on group basis.

Methodological innovations are unlikely to succeed without the participation of students. Learners may be particularly resistant to change if the change that is required of them runs counter to what is taking place elsewhere within the system. In order to avoid resistance students should be aware of the tasks. It is clear that the onus of learning rests with the students.

Methods Used to Overcome Problems of Class Size

The respondents felt that they taught in 'seminar halls' whenever they go to teach in large classes. It was also said that teaching in large classes was like 'addressing a public meeting'. It was further regarded as a 'jungle' and a 'suffocated cinema hall' by some of the respondents. What methodology could be appropriate under such circumstances?

Four different methods were used by participants to overcome problems of class size. The first is the group work method. The tertiary level respondents (30%) helped their students by dividing them into groups. The students were divided into different groups and given a try at solving problems, collectively. Each member of the group was required to play a part in tackling the group problem or in completing the assignment. They also devised ways in which the different groups could interact. The responses (25%) from the primary level indicated that teachers also used grouping even at a lower level (especially for creating competition among the students).

This is an encouraging breakthrough in large class teaching. The new ritual is characterized by the active participation of the teachers and students. Both teachers and students have their own part to play in making the class lively. The teacher should be in charge of facilitating a conducive learning milieu. The students, on the other hand, should remain responsible for tackling the problems encountered. Both the individual in the group and the inter-group interaction play a significant role in the teaching and learning

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process. Coleman's 'Risking Fun' lessons in Hassanuddin University, Indonesia, could be cited as an example for task based language teaching in large crowds. The lessons passed through three stages. They were developed out of a learner and text task, during which the students read background information. Then, they entered in a busy stage, usually centering on a polydyadic task, in which randomly distributed data were gathered. At last, lessons passed into a longer stage during which data were sorted, analysed and interpreted through several intergroup and intragroup tasks.

The English curriculum may not be designed to meet the demands of teachers who want to use group work technique. However, the teacher is expected to set various tasks that are relevant to the unit or chapter of the text book.

Though it is risky to correct individual assignments, a number of tertiary level respondents (16%) and secondary level respondents (10%) tried to solve the large class problem by giving a wider chance to individual learners to do independent work including silent reading. Pair works, and individually done tasks are embraced in this method.

There are a number of things that could be done on an individual basis, including projects and assignments. These could be arranged in such a way that the specific individual works in aggregate would give a complete meaning. For example, in the 'Risking Fun' lessons during the first activity, learners read a detailed examination of the sorts of information which can be found on the title page of the book, its back cover and so on as a background information. At the beginning of the second task data slips (each slip represents one of the four types of material taken from a book: the book's title page, its printing history, a synopsis of the contents and a biography of the author) were handed out at random, and the activities are done on a group basis. Information about seven different books was made available. In the third activity, learners read a description of what an annotated bibliography is as a background information. This is identical to the first activity. Then, learners return to the groups which they formed during the second activity and write an entry for an annotated bibliography using the four data slips. Finally, learners were required to create a complete annotated bibliography on all seven books.

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Some of the tertiary level respondents (27%) and the bulk of the secondary level respondents (58%) used class discussion which was dominated by oral practice. Assignments and exercises were discussed orally. The method was dominated by teacher - student conversation in which case both the teacher and the students were active. It includes oral exercise, questioning and answering in the class, and demonstration.

A number of respondents from the tertiary level (27%) chose the lecture method by using chalkboard as a way of teaching. The secondary school respondents (32%) preferred teacher-presentation method by which the teacher is active and the students are passive throughout the period. It is clear from the responses (75%) of elementary school teachers that most of them preferred to use a teacher dominated class to other methods. Their method included explanation using chalk-board intensively and using oral exercise simultaneously. They were also giving notes since most of the students did not have text-books. Nevertheless, there was a strong opposition against this method since the student's role was insignificant. The respondents commented that lecture discourages the learner.

Management

There were two types of management problems, viz, managing the classroom and managing learning.

There were a number of problems with regard to managing a crowded class. A number of secondary level respondents (32%) and primary level respondents (31%) expressed difficulties of controlling classroom discipline, and maintaining discipline with a minimum level of noise and disturbance. Class control was extremely difficult since the level of noise gets higher and higher as the number of students increases. They said that it is impossible to control the class completely. Few of the tertiary level respondents (6%) had a feeling that large classes hindered them from controlling the classes in which they were teaching.

There was also a feeling that it was not only boring but also frustrating to teach in large stuffy classes since it could create discomfort adding to the problem of space. The class size does not only affect the class control but also hinders the learning process. The teacher's attention would only be on fulfilling his 'formal duties' (formal

teaching) overlooking the learning aspect. Large classes create impediments in the formation of personal contact with everyone and in paying attention to the students' particular needs. It is undeniable that large class teaching requires additional energy and time.

Conclusion

All respondents generally accepted the idea that large class teaching is actually different from language teaching in small classes. It seems very clear that large classes are a real problem since 59% and 29.5% of all the respondents perceived it as 'one of the major problems' and 'the major problem', respectively. The problem was relatively less serious at the tertiary level. In general, however, one could say that the teachers at all levels were highly concerned with large classes.

The data collected revealed that as the 'level' of the classes increases, the size of the class decreases. The teachers' experience and perception of class size follow similar pattern. It could also be argued that they had developed different tolerance limits based on their actual teaching

experience. What is perceived as ideal by primary and secondary respondents is either 'large' or 'too large' for tertiary respondents showing the wide difference in perception (perception being based on past experience). The methods used in large classes are strongly influenced by the size of the class and the will of the teacher. Grouping the students is found to be a partial solution to alleviate the problem of teaching in large classes. Each lesson should be organized in such a way that the students would be able to participate in the process and contribute something.

Sharing the responsibility with the learners is believed to be a means of solving the problem. The task based group teaching could further help the teacher to maintain class discipline since everybody is busy doing his own task. A sort of healthy competition could also be created among the various groups in the process of doing the given tasks. However, teachers believed that some other steps should be taken such as providing excess time for the large class teachers and reducing the teacher's load.

The teachers also recommended the necessity

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of teaching English at grade 1 level and the establishment of a school based transmission centre (involving articles, poems, jokes, scientific discoveries and others in English) which could function with a minimum cost in the schools so that the students would get better opportunities to listen to the English language.

The writer believes that further research should take place in order to find out how typical and representative the data are since this research was done in a city where so many other social and political factors directly affect the learning process.

Recommendations

There is a strong opinion that students should be trained to help themselves.

Teaching 'learning about learning' is an important lesson for secondary school learners in order to avoid the old teaching and learning ritual and replace it by new teacher - student relationship.

Task based group work technique is recommended for teaching large classes.

Curriculum designers should take into account the large class learning milieu and introduce task based lessons that could be done on group basis. Suitable teaching and learning materials should also be prepared.

Seminars and workshops should be held for the teachers in order to deal with the problem in light with the new thinking. Teachers should also be trained in group management.

Notes

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2. Leo van Lier, Analysis Interaction in Second Language Classrooms. In ELT Journal vol. 38/3, July 1984.
3. Marhazion Haile, The English Ability of Learners at Elementary Level and its General Impact on Education, Asmara, 1988.
4. George Jacobs, Cooperative Goal Structure: A way to group activities. In Elet Journal vol. 42/2.
5. Hywel Colman, Teaching Spectacles and Learning Festivals, In ELT Journal vol. 41/2 April 1987.
6. Rob Nolasco and Lois Arthur, Try Doing it with a Class of Forty, In ELT Journal vol. 40/2 April 1986.

APPENDIX - 1

Questionnaire 1

Many teachers say that teaching English in large classes is a problem for them. But in what way are large classes a problem? How do large classes stop teachers from doing what they would like to do? Your responses to this questionnaire will help us to answer these questions?

IMPORTANT: Please think only of ENGLISH LANGUAGE classes.

1. How many people are there:
 - a) in the largest class which you regularly teach? _____
 - b) in the smallest class which you regularly teach? _____
2. What is your usual class size? _____
3. What is your ideal class size? _____
4. What class size do you consider to be uncomfortably large?

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- a) At what number do the problem begin?

- b) At what number do the problems become intolerable? _____
5. What class size do you consider to be uncomfortably small?
- a) At what number do the problems begin?

- b) At what number do the problems become intolerable? _____
6. Among your problems how important is class size? Is dealing with large classes (please ring the appropriate letter)
- a) the major problem?
- b) one of the major problem?
- c) a problem but not a major one?
- d) a very minor problem?
- e) no problem at all?

APPENDIX 2

Questionnaire 2

Under each of the following, please list as many points as you can.

1. Is language teaching in large classes actually any different from language teaching in small classes?
2. Large classes make it difficult for me to do what I would like to do because.
3. With an ideal number of students in my class, I could.
4. When I am teaching a large class, I help my students to learn English by.
5. Do you have any other comments or questions about teaching and learning in large classes?
6. Is the institution you teach in (please ring the appropriate letter).
 - a. primary/elementary?
 - b. secondary?
 - c. college/university?
 - d. other (please specify)?