



## HELPING TEACHERS TO COPE WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE LARGE CLASSES: HOW TO PROMOTE STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVE LEARNING

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this paper is to examine how to help teachers cope with English Language Large Classes: Promoting Students Engagement and Active Learning. It discusses the concept of large classes. Furthermore, the paper examines which class is better between small and large classes and highlights not only the common problems in English Language large classes but also the essential strategies to promote students' engagement and active learning. The major conclusion of the study is that class size has a significant role in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, it is important to explore various methods and apply effective strategies that minimize the effects of large classes and elevate the teaching and learning level to its highest standard. The paper then makes recommendations for teachers teaching larger classes so they can improve certain areas of their teaching styles/patterns as this will impact their effectiveness in service delivery.

**Keywords:** barriers, strategies, EFL, large class, active learning

### **1. Introduction**

It seems that English teachers have no doubt that the large size of classes is a prime impediment to efficient English teaching and learning. With more students enrolling in schools, large classes in a country like Nigeria and other developing countries like Egypt, India, and Pakistan tend to be obligatory rather than exceptional. Therefore, the problem seems to expand widely. As a matter of fact, large classes are not in and of themselves an

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issue to look forward to with dread. Admittedly, they require great intention and careful preparation from teachers before the teaching process takes place. Rohin (2013) views large classes as small businesses that should be set up and handled carefully. Generally speaking, experienced English teachers in general and teachers beginning teaching, in particular, find it onerous to manage a class with a big number of students with various levels and different personalities. Therefore, it is helpful for teachers to divert a lot of class responsibility to students and back up a little and that will give students space to teach each other. No one is absolutely certain whether small classes are inherently better than large ones in regard to the roles both classes play and their effectiveness in the process of English teaching and learning. Therefore, finding a definition for an idealistic class size that could be applicable in almost all teaching and learning environments tends to be difficult (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). Interestingly enough, teachers in general and English teachers in particular always favor small classes and believe that students in small classes learn better than their counterparts in large classes as more practice and activities are employed. In fact, their beliefs are not supported by lots of research in this field. According to Yelkpiri, Namale, Donkoh, and Dwamena (2012) teaching large classes can be a daunting experience. How do teachers keep students engaged and active without losing control of their classroom? With so many students, how do the teachers know if they are learning? Should they attempt to take attendance seriously or risk losing students? How do they build rapport when learning 200 names? Any teachers who have taught (or are preparing to teach) a large class, should have probably asked themselves these questions (Strovas, 2015). Yelkpiri, Namale, Donkoh and Dwamena (2012) argue that large class size is one of the problems in the educational sector that developing nations have been grappling with. Nigeria as a developing nation is no exception and has its own fair share of this problem at the pre-tertiary and tertiary levels of education. The sight of large classes at the tertiary level is appalling and a headache to teachers at that level. Teachers in different countries have different opinions about what a large class is (Rohin, 2013). Almost all teachers think that their own classes are too large, even in Europe where classes usually have 20-40 pupils. However, many teachers around the world have over 40 pupils, and some have over 100. This presents them with many challenges. The good news is that there are possible solutions to all of these challenges, and many of these solutions have been developed in African and Asian countries by teachers (Anderson, 2015).

## **2. The Concept of Large Classes**

The effectiveness of class size on students' achievement and motivation, and its synchronous relation to the teaching process and teachers' workload, attitudes, and motivation is probably the most written about, however, it least explored topic in the educational field. Yet, there is no consensus definition in literature as to what constitutes a large class as material developers, teachers, and students in different parts of the world have various perceptions of what frames large, small, or ideal classes. Their ideations,

therefore, are affected by the educational philosophies, theories, and experiences of all parties involved in the teaching and learning process (Fauzia & Smith, 2010). According to Anderson (2015), there is no numerical determination of what shape a large class as teachers' perceptions of large classes differs from one context to another. Hess (2017) assumed that a class is considered large if it has 30 students or more. As regard to the Nigeria context, a class of 45 students is considered to be large while in some Far East countries such as Japan, China, Pakistan, and India a class of 80 students and more are deemed to be large.

Yelkperci, Namale, Donkoh and Dwamena (2012) believed that regardless of the number of students in a class, it is teachers' perceptions towards the class size in a certain context with particular tools and facilities that are provided that make classes either small or large. Hence, we can say that large classes are those with a specific number of students that teachers cannot handle and resources are not enough to facilitate the teaching and learning process and which poses insurmountable problems for both teachers and students. Mulryan-Kyne (2010) also shares that view and points to a large class as *"a class that is too large for effective teaching to occur"* (p. 176). Hess (2017) on the other hand, believed that an ideal class should not exceed 12 students. In another word, a class should be big enough to offer variation and allow interaction and small enough to provide students with opportunities for participating and receiving individual attention. According to Rohin (2013) what is considered to be a large class is not easily answered because it is dependent upon many factors, for example, institution, discipline, and even the class itself. A large Creative Writing class may have 40 students while a large Biology class may have over 200. If the workload for the course is higher than normal because of the number of students enrolled, then, the class can be safe to be labelled a large class. In addition to the number of students, Hornsby, Osman, and De-Matos-Ala (2013) suggest that the diversity of student characteristics (e.g., ability, age, background, and experience), as well as instructor characteristics (e.g., experience, skills, competencies), should be considered when labelling a class as 'large' in the end, these are not important. What's important is that one should recognise when to tweak his/her instructional strategies to better cater to a large number of students and/ or workload (Hornsby et al, 2013). Handi and Arante (2015) posit that a class comprising of 30 students is considered a normal class and if it exceeds that number, then, such a class can be classified as a large class. For language learning, a class with more than 20 students might be perceived as a large class. However, there is no clear definition of what constitutes a large class (Rohin, 2013).

### **3. Small or Large Classes: Which Are Better?**

As mentioned at the outset, there are some scholars who favor small classes as they believe that small classes provide ample opportunities for teachers and their students to accomplish the highest level of language achievement. One of these is Miller-Whitehead (2013) who suggested that small classes assist in raising teachers' spirit and decrease most discipline issues. She elaborates by stating that small classes allow teachers to identify

problems quickly and then apply immediate remedial solutions and that will eliminate or at least minimize any future disruption. On the other hand, Finn, Pannozzo, and Achilles (2013) revealed that class size has great effects on students' social and academic involvement in the class and on the teacher's personality as well. That is to say that students in small classes, contrary to their peers in large ones, are always under pressure to participate in class activities as *"they are on the frying line, by being more visible to the teacher and may be called upon at any time to answer questions or to participate in a class activity"* (p. 346). On a similar view, Resnick (2013) claimed that smaller classes elevate students' achievement as teachers in such a context pay greater attention to each and every student leaving students with no time to either be destructive or distracted by any means. Consequently, students in small classes encounter continuous pressure to engage in various activities and become active class members and that will make the attention to learning goes up and off-task actions as well as any disruptive behaviors go down. On a similar view, Normore and Ilon (2016) assert that classes of a small size positively influence the teaching process as they encourage students and teacher engagement, allow students to be more cognitively engaged, offer ample time for teachers to cover the whole materials and provide safe school environment with fewer misbehaved students. Finn et al. (2013) conducted a study to examine how class size affects the social behavior of students and sought to focus on antisocial attitudes such as disruptiveness and misbehavior. From the result of their study, they found that small classes encounter fewer misbehavior actions than large classes as students in small classes are engaged in more social interactions with their teachers which give them less space to misbehave or fool around. Shamim, Negash, Chuku, and Demewoz (2017) reinforced this idea when they revealed that teachers in large classes have problems establishing discipline in their classrooms and dealing with the increasing noise level and that according to Al-Jarf (2016) creates difficulty for students to hear the teacher and concentrate because they are distracted by the actions of their peers. From what has been mentioned so far, is to say that large classes have a negative influence on teachers and students which reflects on the teaching and learning outcomes.

#### **4. Common Problems in English Language Large Classes**

The first difficulty a large class encounters are that because there are so many students, the teacher cannot give attention equally to all of them. Therefore, when questions are asked, only more able and less shy students are eager to answer. Too often, interaction is restricted to students in the front rows. The teacher cannot pay equal attention to all students—if he tried to call on everybody in the class to answer his questions, it would take too much time. The lesson would never be finished, and uninvolved students would get bored and start to do something else. Sometimes, seats at the back are usually for those students who have something to do other than the English language or who want to hide away so that the teacher will not ask them to speak. As a result, students'

opportunities to practice are lessened and only a few good students improve their English, while many averages or weaker ones make little progress or fall further behind. A second difficulty is due to differences in background knowledge. According to Resnick (2013), large classes are always heterogeneous, and heterogeneous classes are especially problematic when they are large. Because of the fact that in a large, heterogeneous class, students' levels of English vary greatly, the materials used are too easy for some students but too difficult for others. Many of the better students will either quit coming to class or bring other books to read. In a class in which some students are quite fluent in expressing opinions about various daily problems, but others either find it difficult to express themselves or are not interested in these problems, it is very difficult for teachers to fulfill his/her duty of helping students to express what they think in their own words (Fauzia & Smith, 2010). For example, given a class a very interesting topic to discuss, some students might be indifferent and unable to express themselves or lack knowledge about the topic. When students' abilities vary widely, it is difficult to find topics that interest them all.

Another difficulty that a teacher of a large class must cope with is how to correct written work. After giving a test to a class with 50 students, the teacher has to take home 50 papers to correct. It should also be borne in mind that he/she does not teach only one class and that each of his/her classes might take three or four tests every semester. A teacher has to spend large amounts of time marking written work from various classes, and the teacher might not be very happy about this. It takes time away from the time he/she should be spending preparing lessons and doing things with his/her family. In addition, correcting so many papers means that specific feedback is likely to be limited or nonexistent. On assessment, when assignments, and giving written feedback take much more time (Marais, 2016). Grading can be more complicated. With oral activities, it may be hard to know who is succeeding in a large class because it may be hard to know what mistakes are being made by whom (Brady, 2011). Also, how does a teacher keep good students occupied if they finish quickly? What about the struggling student who can't keep up? A teacher can't spend extra time with that student when he/she has so many others to pay attention to. How can the student be allowed to participate according to his or her abilities?

Besides the above, discipline can be a difficulty in large classes. The fact that a class is large does not directly cause discipline problems, but when a difficulty arises, large groups are more difficult to handle. Also, it is difficult to get to know all the students in a large class. How can a teacher distinguish one student from fifty or more others when he/she meets only once or twice a week? Matters only get worse when a teacher is in charge of three or four large classes. A teacher can often get confused as to which students belonged to which class. Even among students from the same class, he could sometimes not tell one from another, especially those with the same given name. Whenever he points at somebody to call on him to answer a question, two or three others could stand up because they could think he was calling on them. When a teacher has trouble telling one

student from another, he/she cannot follow the progress of each student, and, therefore, has difficulty in helping them to improve their English language (Brady, 2011).

In addition, in classroom management, when a teacher talks to one group, another group is goofing off. Learning everyone's name is hard. It's difficult to get students to pay attention. Cheating can become a problem when one can't be everywhere at once. In a large class, there's more chance that making one student happy will make another student unhappy. Everything takes more time. Space and a sufficient amount of materials become classroom management problems (Bahanshal, 2013). Teachers can't monitor groups if there's no space to walk around the room, and if he/she has 100 students, it may be literally difficult to regularly make 100 copies of materials.

Teaching large classes can be challenging. Logical concerns, such as taking attendance register, grading, and providing frequent and detailed feedback, can quickly become unmanageable. To account for these logical concerns many instructors may use unproductive teaching methods like relying strictly on lectures. A lecture-based, large class leads to very little interaction between instructor and student, causing the student to feel anonymous and isolated (Sulistyowati, 2012). These feelings of isolation lead to lower motivation, poor engagement, lower attendance, and more distracting behaviours (e.g., students talking, texting, surfing online, etc.) for the students. In large, lecture-based classes, students are also more likely to report low satisfaction levels on semester evaluations (Hornsby et al., 2013).

Students tend to feel anonymous and isolated in large classes, which makes them less likely to attend regularly, especially if the class doesn't apply to them directly (e.g., non-majors taking an introductory History class). Attendance can also be logically difficult to record when teachers have many students to account for. According to Sulistyowati (2012), before writing an attendance policy, teachers need to determine their philosophy on the issue. Is it important that every student attend every class day? If so, then writing a clear attendance policy would be important for them. If a teacher does not plan on taking attendance and feels that it is the individual student's responsibility to choose to attend class, then he/she will not need an attendance policy. With either attendance philosophy, a teacher will need to implement strategies to encourage students to come to class: engaging lectures, active learning, and relating the material to students' lives. If a teacher chooses not to take attendance, he/she may want to give students the occasional extra credit point when they come to class and participate in active learning (Hornsby et al., 2013)

## **5. Essential Strategies to Promote Students Engagement and Active Learning**

With the great number of students enrolling each year in schools and the limited facilities, reducing class size in some teaching contexts in developing countries like Nigeria seems to be impossible. Therefore, many scholars have proposed shifting from concentrating on class size to seeking more realistic and effective ways of coping with the situation and exploring the kind of teaching, either in large or small classes, that can produce a

difference (Al-Jarf 2016), Sulistyowati, 2012 and Normore & Ilon, 2016). The following ideas may help to provide more productive learning experiences for students in English Language large classes.

**a. Use Structured Groups Consistently**

To learn languages, practice is essential. In large classes, teachers have to create ways for students to practice without continuous, direct teacher monitoring—structured groups are the only way to accomplish this (Miller-Whitehead, 2013). Using groups allows students to be self-managing and allows more time for practice. Groups can be created in almost any class. Even when desks can't be moved, having the front students turn back and the back students turn forward can make pairs and quads. Grouping strategies also occasionally allow better student support for struggling students when the teacher sees the need but lacks the time because he/she can pair a stronger student with a struggling student as a provisional 'stand-in' for his/her own guidance (Bahanshal, 2013).

**b. Routines Rock**

Doing in large classes what one does in small classes, structures must be much more explicit and consistent. If the routines are the same every day, students need less specific guidance and can operate more independently. Classroom management problems can be solved with clear, consistent rules. Some common large class routines include having predictable sequences for every class; emphasizing the goal and steps of instruction at the beginning of every class; establishing patterns for how students move in and out of groups, and having fixed activities appropriate and engaging for each student if a group should finish its task early. Teachers may need to use the local language in class more (at least initially) to make sure students are clear on all rules and instructions of classroom routines (Bahanshal, 2013).

**c. Increase Student Responsibility**

This leads to better learning and more class discipline. Because teachers do not have enough eyes to monitor every group of students, it is important to create routines in which students monitor themselves and students monitor (and support) each other. Assigning regular team leaders who liaise with the teacher, and assigning other team members ongoing roles in carrying out learning activities helps make everyone more accountable (Marais, 2016).

**d. Emphasize Positive Behaviors to Improve Classroom Management**

By making abundantly clear to students what good behaviors are, by praising students who practice good behaviors, and by asking students to describe or model good behaviors when questionable behavior occurs, teachers should create classes focused on good behavior. In large classes, building habits of good behavior creates a culture that tends to reduce behavioral disruptions. Too often, students don't know what good behavior is, or how important it is. Focusing on good behavior also reduces the

resentment that comes when the teacher must address problem behavior (Bahanshal, 2013).

#### **e. Peer and Self-assessment Are Musts in Large Classes**

Peer and self-assessment do not ask students to grade each other. They provide checklists to reinforce and implement practices that the teacher wants students to adopt. This way, when assignments arrive on the teacher's desk, they have at least been reviewed twice and may have fewer errors to correct. When approached in this mindful manner, large classes have the potential to become teachers' most memorable classes (Marais, 2016). In requiring transparency (we have to be clear on rules, expectations, and means of assessment), in showing respect (students will not take on added responsibility if they are not going to be appreciated for their effort), and in operating in trust, (students have to become the teacher's eyes and ears and the students need to know that the teacher won't suddenly change the rules), we create a state of balance between autonomy and collaboration where learning and community can flourish (Tan, 2009).

Moreover, collaboration can also help a teacher. Students work together, with more advanced students helping weaker students as their contribution to a lesson. Although students might not interact directly with the teacher, everybody in the class has a chance to 'touch' the point or problem being taught. Moreover, if a teacher has students work individually too often in a class of 50, he will have 50 different assessments to do in his mind at the same time. This is practically impossible, but if students work in groups, he can see generally how students are working and how they cooperate in groups (Miller-Whitehead, 2013).

#### **f. Another Way is Through Extra Classwork**

Teachers can give students assignments with levels, from a minimum that all students must do to more advanced work for better students in the class. In this way, everybody has something useful to do. Weaker students are happy that they can at least meet the teacher's requirements, and better students are usually motivated to try their best as well (Marais, 2016). In addition, pair and group work can help students increase their participation. Through pair and group work, students, especially shy ones, can work together and have a chance to practice English language. One thing teachers should bear in mind when asking students to work in pairs or in groups is that they must make sure everybody knows exactly what is expected during the activity. To reduce problems caused by differences in background knowledge, teachers should allow them by using open-ended cues (Tan, 2009). If a teacher sets the same standard for all students, that standard will be too easy for some but too difficult for others. Once a teacher has worked with students long enough to know their levels, he should assign less difficult tasks to weaker students and more difficult ones to more advanced students. If these students do well in their more demanding jobs, they can be awarded extra marks. Teachers can also design questions with a number of acceptable responses, rather than ones with only one correct answer. Questions with a number of possible responses encourage more



contributions from both stronger and weaker students (Tan, 2009). Additionally, if it is a matter of opinion, they will be eager to say what they think because they know that opinions differ; if they see it as a matter of right or wrong, they will hesitate in case they are wrong. One further benefit of open-ended cues is that they increase the amount of time students contribute to the lesson and decrease the time monopolized by the teacher. Even when a teacher uses textbook exercises, he/she can still make them more open-ended by either allowing students to choose which questions to answer first or by inviting them to add other questions of their own (Hayes, 2016).

The problems of discipline and interesting topics can be dealt with by varying topics, methods, and texts to make activities more interesting. We know that few topics interest everyone, but if the teacher raises a wide range of topics, more learners will be pleased more of the time. This depends in part on the age and experience of the students. Older learners, for example, are more aware of the need to study and generally more cooperative, while younger learners are often better at imitating and prefer lively activities (Hayes, 2016). A teacher can choose different topics and use different methods suitable to each group. Even, if the language point being taught does not attract students' attention, the form can hold their interest and keep everyone participating. Songs, stories, presentations, movies, and games provide 'pleasurable tension and challenge'. Having too much-written work to correct can be a real burden. Therefore, whenever it is appropriate a teacher can use peer correction, feedback, and evaluation. This significantly reduces his/her load, because the first and second drafts have already been corrected by students' peers. In the third draft, the teacher does the correcting him/herself, but a teacher can choose to correct only typical errors. If he/she sees a mistake that is serious or often repeated, that particular point is dealt with in a separate lesson. Also, it is advisable not to collect written work from all the students in a large class at the same time. Instead, the teacher can collect only a dozen papers from different people to correct each time. This makes teachers' work lighter and students have the benefit of a speedier return of their work.

### **g. Group Work and Pair Work Can Increase Students' Participation**

These methods can also give a teacher time to move from group to group and talk to different students to get to know them. This should be a way to get to know students in a large class. Meeting them outside class may not be possible due to teacher or student schedules and other commitments (Brady, 2011).

Even though teachers believe it is extremely important to decrease the number of students in classes, they confirm the significance of finding alternative teaching methodologies that are beneficial for elevating language learning in large classes. One way that is considered to be significant is to set good rapport between teachers and students and among students themselves which will help to minimize the anxiety where all in the class will feel as part of the same learning context. In spite of the different constraints large classes have on the teaching and learning outcomes, many teachers attempt to improve their level of teaching by employing multiple techniques such as team

teaching, group work, reducing the workload, and utilizing whole class discussion. Yazedjian and Kolkhorst (2017) and Herington and Weaven (2018) confirm that forming a small group of students help to reduce the noise, saves time in performing a certain activity and allows teachers to concentrate on small numbers of groups instead of focusing on many individuals. It is also a useful technique to bring distractions to their lowest limit by involving every student in the learning process. In words, engaging students in challenging activities where individuals or groups compete with one another would bring positive effects on large numbers in classes (Marais, 2016). Moreover, creating interesting activities that make students effectively occupied at the same time will increase students' on-task behavior, minimize students' boredom and bring loafing to its lowest level and which of course will promote language learning. In a study conducted by Adrian (2010) on college students, he finds that active learning involves "*students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing*" (p. 2).

Another beneficial remedy to overcome any problem that tends to occur in large classes is to allow students to play an active role in class and involve them in all decision-making about classroom life as controlling the noise level or handling any disciplinary actions by setting rules and punishment among groups or individuals. Herington and Weaven (2018) believe that students are willing to abide by the rules they set and not only that but they will make sure that these rules are effectively applied. In words, such action is expected to be useful in the possible growth of some fruitful and compatible strategies in order to minimize the level of disturbance in class and maximize the level of learning.

Other scholars have also emphasized the importance of students' evaluation as a way of promoting the learning level (Al-Jarf, 2016; Herington & Weaven, 2018). Yazedjian and Kolkhorst (2017) reiterate this idea by stressing that assessing and evaluating students is a significant tool in the teaching and learning process, they further explain that:

*"...to the right is an emergent, constructivist paradigm in which teachers' close assessment of students' understandings, feedback from peers, and student self-assessments would be a central part of the social processes that mediate the development of intellectual abilities, construction of knowledge, and formation of students' identities."* (p. 4).

There are some benefits that teachers can have while confronting large classes. They are grouping multiple activities; mixing up pairs or groups, energy, variety, and conversation. The teacher can have these kinds of benefits while conducting large classes (Chandler, 2012). These benefits work well when the teacher uses some techniques like image, interaction, change, group/pair work, and a variety of activities. In one or another way, teachers can use it in a different way with different students of different age groups. It helps to draw the attention of the students.

## 6. Conclusion

Synthesizing the earlier views, we can say that large classes are not firmly a pedagogical dilemma as the complications found in large classes raise more demands and actions from language teachers in large classes compared with their counterparts teaching smaller ones. From the literature review, we can say that class size has a significant role in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, it is important to explore various methods and apply effective strategies that minimize the effects of large classes and elevate the teaching and learning level to its highest standard. Hence, the effectiveness of any technique may vary from one context to another as it relies heavily on different aspects such as students, teachers, and facilities available in a certain school.

## 7. Recommendations

Teachers of large classes need to be given special training programmes which possibly would best make the most impact toward improving the teaching of large classes with necessary skills which not only benefit the teachers but also their students. This can be achieved through workshops and consultations with the teachers. It is crucial for the stakeholders like governments, and private and trade unions to find creative ways to collaborate on issues pertaining to the management of teaching large classes and avail more resources in order to increase the prospects of success.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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