

Teaching Large EFL Classes: Highlighting the Problem and Responding Constructively

*Samiha MOKEDDEM –TAGRARA**
Department of English
Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts
University of Djillali Liabes, Sidi Bel Abbés - Algeria
samiha.mokeddem.gh@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Overcrowded classrooms tend to be a standard feature of most EFL classes in many countries around the world. And even though EFL teachers instinctively feel that they could do a better job in smaller classes, they still often find themselves having to cope with large classes. The current paper presents an overview of the literature on large classes in EFL teaching. It reviews findings concerning the size of large classes as well as the disadvantages and advantages large classes pose for EFL teachers and learners, and finally, suggests a set of tips that can minimize the drawbacks prevailing in these classrooms. By reading this article, it is hoped that many EFL teachers will not only have some awareness of how to better meet the key challenges of large classroom teaching but also how it is possible for the positive aspects of teaching small classes to be stimulated in large-class environments.

Keywords: *large class, challenges, opportunities.*

1. Introduction

In many, if not most, educational contexts around the world, small EFL classes are no longer the norm. In fact, large class size is one of the biggest challenges facing EFL teachers today; especially in developing countries where classes of 50, 60 or even more students are an increasingly common situation in the language classrooms. With such a reality, many EFL teachers and students alike do not feel reassured to be offered the optimal class-size for an effective teaching and learning to take place. The alarm has been sounded, and EFL teachers have either to dread the experience or answer the challenge. This notion was made clear enough in Brady's (2013:1) words who noted: "Teachers don't like large classes. But if you have a large class, you have a large class. You can struggle and complain, or you can make

* *Samiha MOKEDDEM –TAGRARA*

the commitment to make your large class as effective as a ‘normal’ class.” Not an easy task for teachers indeed! But for many among them, it seems relevant to switch focus from arguing that smaller classes are better to exploring ways of bettering teaching-learning in large classes. Given that class size is most unlikely to be reduced in the foreseeable future, teachers need to come to terms with their problems (Hayes, 1997). Accordingly, the current article discusses what constitutes a large class, investigates and analyses the problems of teaching English in large classes, but further explores the benefits that large classes can offer. Some practical strategies teachers can rely on to take advantage of overcrowded classrooms are discussed by the end.

2. Research Methodology

The research of this paper has been located within a qualitative approach. The paper’s main interest lies in generating a crispy understanding of the topic under discussion by explaining descriptively and theoretically the challenges and the benefits of teaching EFL large classes as well as the strategies recommended to cope with overcrowded learning environments. To this end, a wide variety of books, journal articles, and even virtual conferences are used as sources for data collection.

3. Defining a ‘Large Class’

Since ‘large’ is a relative word, it is hard to set a definition of what a large class is. What constitutes a large class, indeed, might vary from one teaching-learning context to another and sometimes even from one level of education to another in the same educational context (Coleman, 1989). Besides, it is worth noting that the mere number of students present in a class is not sufficient to determine teachers’ and students’ perception of a large class as many other relevant contextual factors and a range of variables might intervene.

According to Earthman (2002:10), “an overcrowded classroom has more students assigned to a classroom-building than the number of students it was designed to accommodate.” Any number of students more than the number a teacher is used to teach is considered large by that teacher, Scrivener (2005) and Todd (2006) added. In a similar vein, Ur (2006:302) noted that “the exact number does not really matter; what matters is how you, the teacher see the class size in your own specific situation.” Also, Baker and Westrup (2000: 2) echoed that thought when they said: “A large class can be any number of students, if the teacher feels there are too many students for them all to make progress.” The same thinking was held by Christopher (2011) who pointed out that the number of students qualifying a class as ‘large’ depends on the individual instructor’s viewpoint.

So, except the number of students present in the classroom, a set of ingredients might intervene to help us shape a definition of a ‘large’ class. In fact, the amount of physical space available in the classroom; the availability of resources; the teaching focus and the objectives being taught as well as teachers’ preferred methodology and teaching style, students’ age, their level of studies and motivation and many other factors might all influence teachers’ perspectives regarding class size (Todd, 2006; Hornsby, Osman and De Matos-Ala, 2013).

Similarly, Shamim and Coleman (2018) clarified that teachers generally do not share a universal conception of the numbers of learners in ‘small’, ‘ideal’, and ‘large’ classes since class size cannot be defined simply in numbers. They identified other relevant variables

influencing perceptions of class size. These include: the number of learners in neighbouring classes and institutions, several physical factors such as the space in the classroom, and the amount and availability of resources vis-à-vis the number of students (density and crowding), several learner and teacher-related factors such as teacher competency, and learners' age and grade level, classroom processes including teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction, the nature of the subject being taught, and, increasingly, teachers' aim to encourage learner participation and active learning in the classroom as manifested in the assessment and feedback strategies used as well as management of teaching-learning in the classroom as shown in the upcoming figure (figure1).

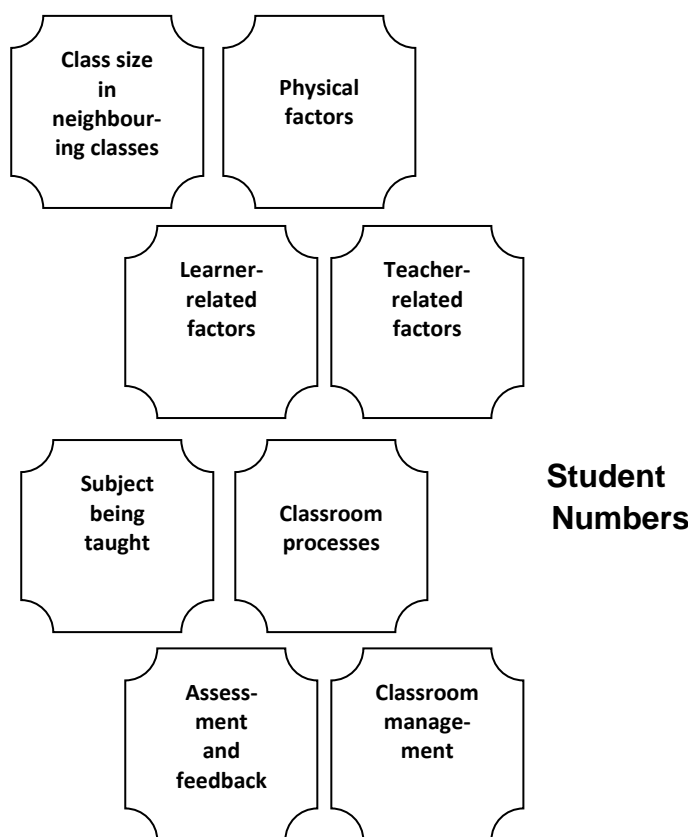


Figure 1: Factors affecting teachers' perception of class size (Shamim and Coleman, 2018, p. 5)

A 'large' class is, therefore; less defined by form (size) and more defined by function (action). The number of learners in the classroom can be seen merely as one of several contextual variables in teachers' perceptions of class size. All of these variables make it impossible to decide how large a class must be to be considered large.

Yet, there seems to be a general consensus among researchers that the minimum number of students in a class to be viewed as a large one falls within the range of 40 to 60 students as shown in table 1.

Author	Minimum Size of Large Class
Baker (1976)	55
Chimombo (1987)	50
Dixon (1986)	40
Finocchiaro (1989)	65
George (1991)	60
Hayes (1997)	50
Holliday (1996)	50
Hubbard et al. (1983)	45
Li (1998)	50
Long (1977)	60
Nolasco and Arthur (1986)	40
Safnil (1991)	60
Samuda and Bruton (1981)	40
Touba (1999)	60

Table 1: Some minimum sizes of large classes (as cited in Todd, 2006, p. 2)

The table summarized the results of previous works done by different researchers on large classes.

4. Common Challenges in teaching Large EFL Classes

Large classes are widely recognized as being problematic for language learning and teaching alike. And Even though teaching large classes requires the same skills and commitment as teaching smaller ones, large classes present challenges that necessitate special attention and call for special strategies and techniques.

Many EFL teachers would agree that teaching a small class does come with a variety of benefits. Johnston (1990) and Blatchford (2003) claimed that teachers are often happier as a result of class size reduction, and this improved morale may translate into enhanced learning outcomes for their students. Anderson (2002) made the same point asserting that small classes can offer enough opportunities to teachers and students, and teachers can teach better as a result. And as Earthman (2002:13) argued, “Evidence continues to accumulate that shows that reducing class size improves students’ achievement, reduces discipline problems, and provides a lasting benefit to both students and teachers.”

When the class size is smaller, students generally feel a sense of community and therefore feel more comfortable voicing their questions and opinions (Harfitt, 2012), and teachers can design lessons meeting the needs and interests of all the class members. Besides, teaching is often student-centered and more communicative than is possible in large classes. And this can enhance students’ effective learning and academic success (Yaman and Uygulamada, 2009).

Further, in small classes, assignments and homework are more likely to be completed because teachers are more likely to check learners' performance in such a context, and students get a better sense of how they are improving and where they need to work harder as teachers have enough time to provide detailed feedback (Benwell, 2008, Blatchford, Russell and Brown, 2009). Teachers in small classes can devote more time to individualized attention; they can identify precisely and early those student learning problems that can be remediated before a student falls too far behind. In a smaller class, it is more difficult for students to hide and get left behind. Also, basic instruction can be completed more quickly, providing increased time for covering additional material, and using supplemental tests and enrichment activities (Pate-Bain, Archilles, Boyd-Zaharias and McKenna, 1992). Indeed, in smaller classes, teachers can be more flexible in their teaching and more adventurous rather than sticking to a restricted range of teaching methods and curriculum coverage (Blatchford, Russell and Brown, 2009). Anything you can do in a large class you can do it better in a small one, Felder (1997) went even further.

Researchers like Carbone and Greenberg (1998), Cooper and Robinson (2000), and Brady (2013) associated large EFL classes with students' insufficient involvement and attentiveness, issues in classroom management, difficulties in assessing learning and providing feedback, as well as the lack of teacher-student interactions. Ive (2000:2) noted that students in large classes experience significant challenges to their learning. These include: "... not knowing what is relevant or important information; hesitating in asking questions or in other ways indicating lack of knowledge; hesitation in appearing "smart" to their peers; lack of experience with time management, studying, or other skills necessary for success in college; and perceived anonymity."

According to Xu (2001), there are three commonly perceived problems associated with teaching EFL large classes, namely physical, psychological and technical. The teacher in large classes may feel physically weary as they need to speak louder and move more often or longer distances than they do in small classes. And sometimes, they have to teach hours and hours standing at one place as there is no room to move about freely than they do in less crowded classes. Very often, they even lose their concentration as the classes become too noisy and feel they are unable to control what is happening. Further, students can have trouble seeing the blackboard and even hearing the teacher. The researcher indicated in his study that psychologically, some teachers feel uncomfortable while facing a large 'crowd' of learners, especially when they do not know too much about their students, their needs, interests and expectations. And technically speaking, overcrowded classes may cause an inadequate use of classroom equipments, a shortage of instructional materials, a lack of library collections, and a limited storage space for learning resources (Burnett, 1995, and Green and Doran, 2000). Students attending such classes are, therefore, handicapped in their academic achievement. They lack engagement in classroom activities.

Further, Earthman (2002) found that overcrowded classroom conditions slow down the progress of students' learning. Some of the main significant effects of being taught in large classes, Mulryan-Kyne (2010) reported, are students' poor engagement with course content; less commitment to courses and low motivation, low participation levels, and the lack of interactions and exchanges between students and teachers which can result in anonymity and passivity among students.

Another study undertaken by Wang and Zang (2011) revealed that teachers teaching large classes found it difficult to organize efficient class activities due to the constraints of time and space. Researchers like Yaman and Uygulamada (2009) found that large classes can force teachers to abandon student-centred learning and teacher-centered rote methods become then almost inevitable.

Besides, teachers often failed in providing equal opportunities for students to participate and practice, and in giving effective feedback. In other words, finding time for marking, planning, and assessment is more of a problem in overcrowded classes. Additionally, the achievement of learning objectives is hindered, the completion of learning activities is reduced, and quality learning may not be achievable accordingly (Earthman, 2002, and Yaman and Uygulamada, 2009). Similarly, a report published by the British Council (2015) viewed large classes as being a real challenge to every teacher. Based on the report, it is hard to keep good discipline going in a large class; learners are different, they need to learn different things at different speeds and in different ways, and teachers cannot easily give each learner the individual attention they need. Without that individualized attention, questions, concerns and thoughts students have about a particular topic might not get heard.

Based on the significant pedagogical and management-related challenges explored above, so much research has been conducted to help teachers cope with the problems arisen by the increase number of students in the classroom.

Yet, it is worth noting that classes with fewer students do have disadvantages too. Small classes frequently lack stimulation for the teacher and the learner due to the insufficient variety of learners' experiences. Students do not have the opportunity to hear viewpoints that differ greatly from their own. The competition factor is often lacking in small classes as well. This point was illustrated by Gehringer at the ASEE's Virtual Conference (June 22-26, 2020) saying: "In a small class, there may be only one or two outstanding students. Just as in a race with only one dominant runner, the leader will not have the competition necessary to push him or her to their peak performance." Other problems closely associated with teaching a small group of students are: the overly rapid work completion, fewer activity options, and increased anxiety among students. By looking on the bright side of things then, one might think that large classes offer many opportunities that small classes do not. And if teachers are prepared to take advantage of them, they can make large classes work to advantage for themselves and their students.

5. Large EFL Classes Opportunities

"In any learning situation, students tend to learn more when the instructor capitalizes on opportunities that are characteristic or unique to that particular learning environment while also using creative means to compensate for the specific disadvantages of that environment.", Buller (2009:133) noted. Large classes do offer many opportunities that are less well known, but can be exploited by instructors who are aware of them to help their students study better.

- First, more students in class means **diversity**. Large classes provide a much richer pool of human resources than do smaller or less mixed classes. As explained by Ramana (2017:53) : "The value of a large class is that it contains a diversity of students

and different learning styles, and provides several ways of teaching. The cumulative knowledge, experiences, skills, and interests of our students, furthermore, can be valuable starting points for planning lessons and activities so that learning becomes meaningful.” In other words, students’ dissimilarities in such a context – different cultural backgrounds, different world views, etc. can be used to teachers’ advantage in creating interesting, varied, meaningful and student-centered lessons.

- Second, more students in class means more **competition** (Patel and Chaudhari, 2018). A large class consists of a group of students of different levels, and as it is human nature to want to seek better performance than others, more able students with compete with each others pushing the less able ones to compete as well in order to catch the instructor’s attention and not to be seen among the weak students. Of course, teachers can benefit from such a motivation in a variety of ways.
- Third, a large class means a supportive learning **community** that implies more than a shared sense of a physical place. It involves mutual interests as well as membership in a larger whole. Class members in such a learning environment are offered a great opportunity to share more knowledge and more experiences. They can partner with, and learn from each others making the class an enjoyable place for learners to learn, and an interesting group for a teacher to teach (Gehringer, 2020).
- Fourth, a large class can help students build their **self-confidence** (Patel and Chaudhari, 2018). In such a type of classes, a less able learner is likely to find several other learners of the same level. Accordingly, he/she will become aware of the fact that he/she is not the only one in class performing badly. And thus, he/she will not be afraid of making mistakes knowing that other students will be sympathetic and not so critical to them. Being involved in group work also makes them less shy and more confident engaging with their classmates in the different tasks they are required to do in the classroom.
- Fifth, a large class provides more opportunities for **co-students’ interaction** ; and fosters an atmosphere of **cooperation** (Ramana, 2017). Students learn to work with their classmates who are different than them. In that way, they are exposed to diverse ideas and perspectives from of a variety of learners. And since students know that the teacher cannot pay enough attention to every individual-learner, they have no other choice but to help themselves make progress. In other words, group members care about and support one another in the learning process knowing that what helps one member succeed helps all members succeed (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). Cooperation, indeed, represents not only a way to learn but also a value to appreciate and to incorporate in all aspects of our lives (Forest, 2001).
- Sixth, a large class means an opportunity to **disseminate good teaching** to a wider audience – information and knowledge are spread by a single teacher to reach a large group of learners. In this context, Chambliss and Takacs (2014 :10) commented:

“Good lecturers should teach large classes where they can benefit the most students, especially at the introductory level, where professors can open new intellectual horizons and legitimize the academic enterprise.”

- Seventh, a large class provides greater opportunity for **creativity, innovation** and **general professional development** (Ramana, 2017). Teaching large classes truly forces instructors to invent and develop new ways of organizing material. Teachers can improve their interpersonal skills and try adaptive teaching strategies to cope with the problems arisen from the overcrowded classes. Their teaching and presentation skills can be enhanced as well. Besides, large classes have several benefits for assessing teaching effectiveness (Gehringer, 2020), simply because there is more evidence. Learners can be surveyed after class to see how well techniques have worked with them. In a small class, this might lead to survey fatigue, but in a large class, a different subset can be surveyed each class day. The teacher can determine more quickly when a technique is not working, and can make corrections sooner. It is much easier to do statistically valid research with a control group and an experimental group in the same class.

6. Practical Tips for Tackling the Disadvantages of Large EFL Classes

Large classes are not necessarily less effective than smaller ones, but they do require more conscious effort, reflection, and planning. When seeking strategies to use in a large class, teachers are required to exploit the unique characteristics of that learning environment while compensating for the challenges arising from teaching this type of class (Buller, 2009). Accordingly, a teacher with responsibility for teaching a large class, will find the following tips useful :

- **Establish and Maintain Classroom Discipline :** Large classes need discipline to function smoothly. Discipline implies guidance, limits, firmness, and leadership, not harshness, humiliation, or autocratic control. Teachers should accept and expect the idea that some students will arrive in class with an agenda other than learning (Allwright, 1996). That is why, instructors should establish a code of conduct including firm rules of behaviour, make them clear enough for everyone in class, and of course, stick to them from the first beginning of the academic year. A classroom code of conduct emphasises the responsibilities and rights of each individual in the class, and makes a positive contribution to an improvement in learning. Indeed, an orderly and well-disciplined classroom is a prerequisite for effective learning.
- **Make a large class feel small :** Teachers can make a large class small by treating it as such. They try to remember students’ names – they generally match names with faces (Ramana, 2017). They do not just stand by the whiteboard at the front ; they move around a lot, walking up and down the class even while lecturing. They try to establish their presence with the students so that they feel connected with them (Debowski, 2012). This reduces the distance between them and the learners, as explained by Buller (2009: 134) who wrote: “In large classes it may be even more important than in

other teaching environments for your students to see you as a real person rather than a remote or possibly aloof figure. By opening up more to your students, you will discover that they are more likely to open to you in return.” It also promotes learner involvement.

- **Plan carefully :** Asodike and Onyeike (2016 :37) explained : “Without adequate plan, a teacher is unlikely to be able to control a class whether small or large. He, who fails to plan, plans to fail. The teacher should plan lesson adequately for effective teaching in large classes by considering the content and the process of delivering the lesson while planning.” Large classes need to be meticulously planned (Debowski, 2012). Keeping a large class engaged and energised at all times requires a daily plan of lessons, activities, and assignments. Before each session, instructors need to know what they are going to do and how long each part of the lesson will last. Without a lesson plan, students can quickly lose focus and teachers may be left scrambling, thinking of what to do next. By planning as much as possible, teachers can keep the lesson flowing without interruption (Smith and Warburton, 1997). And for times when teachers’ ideas do not go to plan, they should be prepared having some back-up activities lined up to keep attention and engagement levels high. In other words, teachers should always have more activities than necessary for class. This will fill time if and when the lesson runs short. Further, they should vary their activities to avoid being predictable.
- **Create a well-managed learning environment:** Teachers handling large classes should manage the physical environment by maximising classroom space (Asodike and Onyeike, 2016). Unnecessary furniture should be removed to reduce the feeling of overcrowding and to facilitate movement. Sitting arrangements should be such that students are able to get to the teacher without disturbing others. Instructional material and teaching tools should be stored so that they can be obtained and put away easily.
- **Use group work :** According to Debowski (2012 :71), “Group work is a very important strategy to increase student engagement and learning. Students benefit through interacting with diverse individuals, negotiating outcomes, communicating, listening, and working collaboratively.” And even if working in groups makes some noise, it will be a healthy noise which means that learning occurs. Similarly, Hall (2016:37) noted: “ 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.”
Groups of learners can be organized into : mixed-ability groups or same-ability groups. The teacher can even appoint a group of more able students as leaders or monitors asking them to help slower learners. Of course, the group tasks must be kept simple and appropriate to the students’ interests and capabilities. The teacher needs to move around the classroom to see what progress learners are making and what problems they are facing and gives advice and encouragement when necessary.

- **Manage feedback :** This can be done through some pedagogical changes. For example, instead of relying on long written assignments, teachers can give students frequent short written assignments and quizzes to determine what students know and where they are having the most difficulty (Buller, 2009). Multiple-choice questions are also well-suited for use in large classes as they are amenable to speedy marking or grading (Nayak and Rao, 2004). Moreover, the effectiveness of assessment for large classes can be enhanced through the self and peer reflection (Davies, 2000). Teachers should involve students themselves in assessment. By doing so, assessment becomes not something done to students ; it becomes an activity done with students. This is a good way to reduce teachers' workload and help students to develop self-reflection, critique, judgment and be more responsible for their own learning. It also clarifies students about marking procedures (Brindley and Scofield, 1998). Of course, teachers should dedicate one or two sessions to train students for assessing each others.

7. Conclusion

Every environment for teaching and learning poses its own challenges and opportunities. The current research paper tries to demonstrate in an explicit way that teaching a large class is not an inferior instructional assignment to teaching a small one. It is simply a different learning environment that can enable teachers to think, experiment, change, reflect on their teaching and innovate in creative and unexpected ways. In a nutshell, we can confidently say that teaching a large class is not necessarily a burden if viewed in light of its benefits.

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