



MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING LARGE CLASSES IN CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH

ARJUMAND ARA¹, KAZI AMZAD HOSSAIN²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific, Dhaka

²Lecturer, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific, Dhaka



ARJUMAND ARA



KAZI AMZAD
HOSSAIN

ABSTRACT

Teaching large classes is thought of as a major impediment in providing quality education. These classes pose challenges not only to novice teachers but also to many well experienced teachers who lack the knowledge of the skills and strategies that can be used to make the teaching of large classes effective. It is common to find large classes for socio-economic reasons in the developing countries such as Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, teaching large classes often becomes obligatory rather than a choice. Setting up proper physical environment, maintaining discipline, carrying out in-class activities, providing feedback are some of the major challenges that arise in a large class. Overcoming these challenges of the large classes requires considerable efforts, well-thought out planning, selection of proper pedagogical means and classroom strategies before the class actually takes place. This paper, thus, investigates the problems that teachers face while conducting classes with a large number of students in Bangladesh. It also explores the strategies that can be used to alleviate the problems.

Keywords: Large class, discipline, physical environment, assessment, psycho-social environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As there are many factors which are directly related to class size such as – performance of the students, students' drop-out numbers, appropriate teaching and learning, level of comfort for teacher and student; class size is of paramount importance. At the universities of developing countries such as Bangladesh, teachers often have to face large classes, especially the multi-level ones. Large classes are often considered quite challenging if the teachers are aiming to provide quality education. Numerous research studies (e.g. Blatchford et al, 2002; Yu, 2004; Hatties, 2005) indicate the disadvantages of large classes. These researchers contend that teaching large classes gives teachers

fewer opportunities to provide quality education and set up an environment conducive to learning. In other words, teaching these classes can prove to be challenging as it becomes difficult for the teacher to manage the classroom activities, maintain discipline and assess the learners' performances. While large classes have their own merits and demerits, many teachers, especially the novice ones, can find the experience quite exasperating. This paper focuses on the issues related with the large classes and proposes some suggestions to overcome the problems and to make the classes more effective.

2. Definition of large class

The definition of large class varies from scholar to scholar and also from region to region. For example,

in the developing countries such as Bangladesh, where the current (2015 est.) population is more than 160 million (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Bangladesh) classrooms will be more crowded compared to the developed countries like the USA. According to a report from a workshop held by UNESCO (cited in Lipinge: <http://people.math.sfu.ca/~vjungic/Lipinge.pdf>) scholars tried to define large classes and ended up with the following conclusions:

- i) There is nothing like a large class. The large class is only in the mind of the orthodox teacher;
- ii) A large class is one with more students than available facilities can support;
- iii) There is no fixed number. The large class depends on the discipline – smaller number for engineering, science and medicine and large number for arts, humanities, and social sciences.

In regard to class size, Ur (1996, p. 302) says that, “the exact number doesn’t really matter: what matters is how you, the teacher, see the class size in your own specific situation”. However, Mulryan-Kyne (2010) proposes a different theory considering the course curriculum and resources availability. According to Mulryan-Kyne (2010, p. 176), “Meeting the needs of a class of 50 in a science laboratory designed for 30 is likely to be more challenging than presenting a history lecture to 220 students in a lecture room designed for 200”. Hayes (1997) also suggests that it is not possible to determine the largeness of a class numerically as teachers vary in their perceptions of large classes in different contexts. However, it is not the number of students but the availability of pedagogical materials and facilities that will make classes appear small or large (Ur 1996). In context of Bangladesh we can say that large classes will be those where proper facilities are lacking in.

3. Problems encountered by teachers

Conducting a large class can be very difficult for the teachers and especially for the newly recruited teachers as Harmer (1998, p. 128) said “big classes can be quite intimidating for inexperienced teachers”. Harmer (2000) after conducting a

study, concluded that large classes generally bring difficulties to teaching for several reasons such as: teachers find it challenging to organize activities that are effective and creative. It is also difficult to pay attention to individual students’ especially who sit at the back. Zhang (2002) after conducting a study on college students on the effect of large classes found out that, a large class can have three problems. These three problems are – disciplinary problems, students and teachers’ drop of energy levels and inefficient learning. Yu (2004) in a similar study on college students found that, in a large class anxiety is the dominant problem, individual’s variant is neglected and also there is lack of practice for the target language due to a large number of students. Based on the above mentioned research and also practical teaching experience, the present authors identify the following problems as the major impediments to quality teaching in the large classes of Bangladesh.

3.1 Setting up proper classroom environment

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching a large class is providing comfortable environment in which teachers can teach and students can learn. The classroom environment encompasses the physical space as well as the learning resources for lessons. A large class may not be often well-equipped for economical reasons. Again, regarding physical space, it can be said that lack of space may not allow a large number of students to move around and work properly either individually or in groups. Inadequate facilities in the classroom, lack of projectors and multimedia also create a disturbing situation in the classroom. Making eye contact with the students is also difficult because the teacher cannot exactly make eye contact with all the students and cannot also move throughout the class easily as it might hamper looking at the learners. Even the students might feel that the teacher is biased if s/he looks at some specific active students most of the time. Organization of study groups, and communication with individuals also seem an overwhelming task.

3.2 Challenges in the management of classroom activities

It is generally accepted that learner centred teaching is quite difficult in a large class. Since

teachers find it hard to give individual attention to most of the students, many students, particularly the weak ones, may feel demotivated. It also makes it difficult to encourage all the students in participating in different classroom activities. In this regard Al-Jarf (2006) thinks that, it is the size of a large class that hinders small group activities and doesn't allow the teacher to give individual instruction. Harmer (2007) also thinks that, a teacher is likely to find it more difficult to take care of students' individual needs in a large class than in a smaller one.

Moreover, the teacher will also find it difficult to understand the strengths and weaknesses of individual students in a large class while organizing different activities with students. For example, if students are asked to say something in a class the teacher will find it difficult to give them enough time as he/she has to move ahead. In addition, teachers need to take extra care of vision and acoustics. In a large class, students specially who sit at the back, sometimes cannot see clearly what the teacher shows or writes or listen to the video or audio clips when the teacher plays them. Furthermore, it becomes really difficult to prepare study materials for a large heterogeneous class, especially when the teacher doesn't know the level of all students specifically. Moreover, distributing study materials in a large class and explaining those are challenging tasks for an instructor.

3.3 Difficulties in assessing students

Assessment is an important and integral part of learning. According to Black and William (1998a, p. 19) "assessment is to be seen as a moment of learning, and students have to be active in their own assessment and to picture their own learning in the light of an understanding of what it means to get better". In a large class, assessing learners in a proper way is a great problem for a teacher. For example, in a class of 50 pupils which runs for 75 minutes at the tertiary level in Bangladesh, it is very challenging to assess students individually. For the new faculty members it is a real nightmare to assess the large number of students within the limited time in each class. Providing positive feedback also fails due to huge number of pupils. Some teachers try objective tests due to lack of time in the class but

that too requires considerable time. Taking any kind of writing tests such as – paragraph writing, formal letter writing, essay writing, etc. and evaluating those answer-scripts are time-consuming tasks for the teacher.

3.4 Maintaining discipline

Many researchers have found that maintaining discipline is a major issue in a large class. In this regard making noise is a common problem in a large class which Harmer (2010); Locastro (2001) and Zhang (2008), think may arise from students' boredom for not being able to understand the instructions to activities that are given in the class and also because of the instructor's low voice. Lazear (2003) mentions that if any student behaves badly and tries to disturb the class, the teacher needs to attend the disturbance and eliminate the noise. In a large class such behavior from one or more students blocks the learning of that moment and also hinders the learning process. In this regard Pedder (2006, p. 224) confirms that,

"In larger classes, more time is needed for non-academic activities related to administrative and organizational procedures and to the management and control of discipline. Reductions in the quantity of learning opportunities constrain teachers from achieving the necessary pace, depth and breadth of curriculum coverage as class size increases."

In fact, discipline in large classes can be a vital issue to consider. In a mixed ability classroom, students get distracted because of various reasons and it is the teacher's responsibility to find out why those pupils are hampering the study environment and to try to seek solutions for this. Most of the time, pupils make chaos because they cannot hear the teacher when sitting at the back of the classroom and they begin to talk, or even play games among themselves. Now-a-days pupils are getting one step ahead with smart-phones. With their smart-phones in their hand they strategically avoid the teacher's eyes because the teacher might think that as they are silent, everything must be fine and students must be so attentive and going with the flow of the lesson at that moment. Besides, playing mobile games also impedes other pupils' attention who are nearby.

4. What are the strategies to meet the challenges of large class?

If we consider the problems discussed above it would be justified to say that there are a few teachers who would willingly want to encounter the challenges of teaching a large class. However, with the increasing number of students enrolling each year in the higher learning institutes of Bangladesh, reducing class size in many teaching contexts seems to be impossible. Therefore, many teachers and educators (For ex. Harmer, 2007) now shift their concentration on finding ways and strategies to teach large classes effectively rather than focusing on the efforts to reduce the class size. The following section describes the classroom strategies that teachers can employ to meet up the challenges of large class.

4.1 Organizing Physical Environment

Managing the classroom environment is one of the most crucial aspects of teaching in large classes. According to the book "Practical Tips for Teaching Large Class: Teachers' Guide" (UNESCO 2006), the classroom environment encompasses both the physical environment that includes teaching resources and also the psycho-social environment.

Regarding the physical environment, it has been suggested in the teacher's guide by UNESCO (2006) that, a classroom needs to accommodate every student comfortably. For that it needs to be well-lit, clean and well-equipped and also spacious enough so that students can move around easily or work as an individual or in groups. In classroom where both individual and group activities take place, seats need to be arranged in such a way that students can see each other as well as the teacher. The creation of such a physical space will not only make them comfortable but also will encourage them to enter into group discussion.

Again, in a large classroom it is important for both teachers and students to use time cautiously. Removing unnecessary furniture and storing teaching resources within reach are two things that will reduce waste of time. Teachers can involve students in these two activities. It will help them to develop a sense of responsibility.

4.2 Creating a psycho-social environment

A classroom is often regarded as a "Learning Community" (UNESCO 2006), as teachers and students see each other every day and work together. Building this psycho-social environment can make a large class feel smaller, motivate learners to learn better and help students and teacher to understand better. A teacher can adopt a number of simple strategies to make a large class feel smaller, such as he/she can move towards a student who has a question to ask. This will help to reduce the physical and social distance. Another good strategy is to know the names of the students and match names with faces. In order to remember the names, the teacher can make a seating chart or ask a few students to introduce themselves in every class or simply can take attendance by using students' names.

In fact, a teacher needs to personalize a large class by presenting himself or herself as a person to the students and not just a classroom teacher. He/she needs to show the students how much he/she wants to know about them and at the same time how much he/she wants them to know about him/her. Teachers should always express themselves and even can relate their own struggle with the lessons in their past. They also need to encourage questions and comments from the students to reduce the gap between themselves and the learners.

4.3 Maintaining Discipline

Setting up rules to maintain discipline is important in every classroom but in a large class its necessity is deemed even stronger. However, teachers need to be careful in selecting the rules because rules are effective only when they are reasonable enough for students to maintain. In order to maintain a well-disciplined and smoothly functioning classroom the teacher can relate to students at the beginning of the semester how certain things such as taking attendance, asking permission for unexpected needs (for example: going to the toilet or drinking water), the use of markers and equipments, etc, will be maintained in the class hours. Choosing these rules will make the classroom environment orderly and ensure better learning. However, the rules need to be maintained

consistently to make the classroom environment orderly. Again, a good teacher always finds a way to control a large class without humiliating or creating panic amongst the students as Carbone pointed out, *"Some faculty use public embarrassment as a deterrent to uncivil behavior, other faculty find public embarrassment distasteful and would rather speak to an errand student in private"* (Carbone, 1999, p. 41).

4.4 Classroom management

In a large class it is particularly important for teachers to prepare them well in advance to run the classroom activities as they need to make the best use of their time. We can identify three main focuses of the classroom management:

- Planning lessons and classroom activities
- Using appropriate teaching methods
- Managing students' activities.

4.4.1 Planning lessons and classroom activities

As far as planning lessons is concerned, teachers need to plan their lessons well ahead the first day of the class as in a large class opting for a spontaneous assignment may prove to be difficult even for an experienced teacher. Teachers need to be comfortable with what they are teaching. They need to structure their lessons logically, find out the objectives of lessons and identify resources and materials needed to teach that lesson. Ensuring these beforehand is likely to make them confident as well as help them to stay focused.

Harmer (2007) also suggests to develop and maintain a formal lesson plan. According to him, a good lesson plan is capable of gaining two objectives

- Outlining what the teacher expects will take place during class
- Making the students understand that the teacher has thought about the lessons.

Harmer (2001) also suggests teachers to be more organized in a large class and take preparation for the classroom activities before the lesson starts. A teacher is likely to find it more difficult to change tack or take care of students' individual needs in a large class than it is with a smaller group of students. It is useful to establish routine that teachers and students will strictly adhere to. Establishing routine will make tasks like taking

attendance, giving homework, establishing group works more convenient. Students will know what is expected since these activities will be 'routine operations' (Harmer, 2007, p.125). So the teacher needs to establish effective routine at the beginning of a course. Harmer (2007) also suggests teachers to use varied pace for different activities as teachers find it difficult to understand the strengths and weaknesses of individual students in a large class. So it is important to be more careful while organizing different activities with students. For example, if students are asked to say something in a large class, the teacher needs to give them enough time to respond before moving ahead.

4.4.2 Using appropriate teaching methods

In a large class, a teacher might appear to be bored or unenthusiastic if his/ her teaching method is uninteresting. Using a variety of teaching methods can include lecturing, in class exercises, presentations, group work and so on. Using pair work or group work can play an important role in maximizing student participation. Even with classes with fixed chairs and tables teachers can adopt several ways such as asking students in first rows turn to face second rows, third rows to face fourth rows and so forth. In classrooms with technological facilities, students can work round computer screens. While using pair work or group work with large groups, according to Harmer (2007), teachers need to make instructions clear, for example, when to begin or end activities or how he/she will give feedback.

4.4.3 Managing students' activities

However, the problem with group work is that most of the large classes become loud and sometimes the teacher feels out of control. Besides, because of domination of some students, others feel intimidated and remain passive in the group. Some may feel they should have been in another group. The teacher has to handle this situation with patience and motivate students to engage in the given activities, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to inform the learners the goal of the activities that they are participating in the class.

Also, teachers need to mitigate the "effects of always working in a large group as a whole" (Harmer, 2007, p.126) by maximizing individual

work. For example, students can be asked to read graded readers as a part of their individual reading program or build their own portfolio of work, or they can be encouraged to make the full use of the institutional library. Teachers can also direct them to language learning websites or encourage them to produce their own blogs.

How teachers can assess students and provide feedback

In a large class grading or giving feedback can be quite challenging. Good teaching practice involves giving students ample opportunities to practice materials and give feedback on their performance. In a large class, time constraint can make it difficult for a teacher to grade classwork or homework assignments and provide feedback. Below are some strategies the teachers can employ –

- For in-class activities which do not require grading, teachers can implement peer grading. This will enable students to get feedback on their work immediately. (Deslauriers et al, 2011). It will also give students an opportunity to teach each other. When a student explains a point to another student it also helps to start a dialogue or bring up new points for debate (Strovas 2015).
- Again for these activities that do not require grading, the teacher can provide students with the answer sheets enabling them assess their own performance.
- Students can be given some assignments based on the class activities which they turn in after the class. Teachers can grade a small sub-set of such assignments. Teachers can also spot check these in class assignments to address common misconceptions. (Strovas 2015)
- Teachers can provide students with frequent feedback which is not graded or formal. This can take the form of a discussion led by the instructor.
- Technology can be incorporated to provide feedback. An online discussion board can be formed to extend and expand a topic that was discussed in a class. (Wood 2009)

- According to some practitioners (e.g. Allen & Tanner 2005, Walker et al. 2008), if classroom logistics makes it too difficult for a teacher to grade in class activities, teachers can base exam questions or assignments on the active learning exercises practised in the class. The teacher needs to make students understand that they will be held accountable for these activities. This is also likely to ensure students' presence in the classroom and also their active participation. In this way, teachers can assess the materials they covered in the classroom through exams only. However, it is always beneficial for students if they are engaged in in-class learning activities from time to time.
- Strovas (2015) also suggests teachers to develop a policy regarding grade disputes that they can clearly mention in the syllabus. She suggests, for example, to use a version of the 24/7 policy i.e. students need to wait 24 hours after getting a grade and then they can approach the teacher to dispute it. This will help giving them time to think through their problem and approach it in a professional manner. Students can also be instructed not to dispute a grade after 7 days of receipt. This will solve the problem of students' asking to regrade exam at the end of the semester.

5. Conclusion

A few teachers would claim that teaching a large class is a choice that they make. It is a reality that many teachers cannot avoid. Although there is not much proven fact that small classes are more effective than large classes, teachers in general prefer small classes. However, when teachers have no choice but to take large classes, they can change their fear of teaching large classes into honest enthusiasm by making appropriate changes in their teaching practice. This paper discussed the problems that teachers are likely to face in a large class and also suggested the strategies that can mitigate the challenges of teaching a large class. However, there are no universal solutions to the problems that teachers face in a large class and the effectiveness of the strategies will largely depend on how big a class is and in what psycho-socio and physical environment the class is taking place.

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A Brief Bio of Authors

Arjumand Ara

The co-author of the paper “**Meeting the Challenges of Teaching Large Classes in Context of Bangladesh**” is Arjumand Ara, presently working as an Assistant Professor in Department of English at *University of Asia Pacific*, Dhaka, Bangladesh. She has an M.A. in TESOL from University of Nottingham, UK and an MA in Applied Linguistics and ELT from Dhaka University, Bangladesh and a Diploma in French language from Alliance Française de Dhaka.

Currently she is working as an Assistant Professor at University of Asia Pacific. Her research interests include Materials Evaluation, Adaptation and Development, Language Teaching Methodologies, Language Systems and Language Acquisition.

Kazi Amzad Hossain

The co-author of the paper “**Meeting the Challenges of Teaching Large Classes in Context of Bangladesh**” is Kazi Amzad Hossain, presently working as a **Lecturer** in Department of English at *University of Asia Pacific*, Dhaka, Bangladesh. He has completed his M.A. in Applied Linguistics & ELT from *University of Dhaka*, Bangladesh. He has worked as a Lecturer in English for more than two (2) years in *Z. H. Sikder University of Science & Technology (ZHSUST)*, Shariatpur, Bangladesh.

His research interests are – ELT, Sociolinguistics, Phonetics and Phonology, Morphology, Motivation in students, English for Specific Purposes (ESP).
