TEACHING VERY LARGE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASS: WHAT TO DO?

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Abstract

Studies have shown that the rapid expansion and global acceptance of English as an international language has led to an increase in the number of people learning the languages especially in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Teaching a large English language class can be a serious challenge to many teachers due to the many problems associated with the sheer size of the class. This paper examines the problem of teaching a large English language class in Nigeria and explores ways of managing the class. Starting off with a discussion on the problems of a large language class, the paper provides some practical ways of dealing with the problems as they relate to teaching English language class in Nigeria. The paper shows and indeed concludes that a large language class is not necessarily less effective than a smaller one, but it does require extra efforts from both the teacher and students to cope with the challenges.

Key words: large class, techniques, strategies, language, and English

1. Introduction

Many studies have been carried out on the problems of teaching a large language class. This paper reviews recent literature on the issue, examines the problem as it affects teaching and learning English language in Nigeria and explores ways of managing the problems. Teaching a large language class is no doubt a serious challenge to many teachers due to the many problems associated with the sheer size of the class. Enerson (1997) notes that the sheer number of students in a large class can magnify some problems that might be more manageable in a smaller class.

So, when is a class too large? The fact that there is no ideal size for a foreign/second language class makes it difficult to define the concept of "large class". In other words, what one teacher might consider as a large class may not necessarily be seen as such by others. A survey by Coleman (1988) found that the perception of "large" is related to the size of the usual class that a teacher regularly teaches. Thus, what we may consider as a large class tend to depend largely on context and expectations. For example, teachers in some private primary and secondary schools in Nigeria may expect classes of thirty (30) to forty (40); for them a class of fifty and above may be seen as

too large. Yet, for teachers in some public schools who teach sixty (60) to eighty (80) students, a class of fifty (50) would be a welcome relief. Although, as Anderson (2016: par. 2) observes, "recent definitions [of a large class] range from about 30 to about 50 students." who usually teach thirty (30) to fifty (50) students working in private language

The paper is organized as follows: Section one provides the relevant background on the nature of a large English language class in Nigeria. Section two provides reviews of some previous related works while, a discussion of the problems and ways of dealing with them forms the subject matter of section three. Section four concludes the study.

2.1 Large ESL Classes in Nigeria

A survey by Malami (2012) on the size of English language classes in some public primary and secondary schools in Nigeria has revealed that the classes range from sixty (60) to three hundred (300) students. One will begin to wonder how much learning can take place in a class of two hundred (200) students, for example, as opposed to a class of half a dozen learners. The next section of this paper looks at how class size affects language learning and teaching.

2.2 Review of previous works

The research on large language classes has identified a number of problems with the sheer size of the class. Coleman (1989) identifies a number of problems affecting teaching and learning in large language classes. According to him, the first problem relates to difficulties in addressing a large number of learners which often make many teachers to become nervous and feel uncomfortable because of the constant focus of many pairs of eyes toward them. This is particularly true of many inexperienced teachers who might get intimidated or become stage frightened. Another problem he identified concerns the difficulties some teachers faced in maintaining discipline and proper classroom management. He notes that a single teacher may not be able to effectively control a large crowd of learners in an English language classroom.

Sarwar (2001) observes that teachers often find it very difficult to regularly correct, evaluate and review every learner's work in a very large class. This can make giving individual attention to all learners in a large language class practically impossible and this often makes creating rapport with all learners extremely difficult.

Similarly, Locastro (2001) identifies the problems of large language classes to include pedagogical, management, and affective-related problems. Pedagogical problems arise in carrying out tasks that

involve speaking, reading and writing; monitoring learners work and giving feedback; difficulties in setting up tasks related to functional use of the target language; and high tendency of teachers to avoid any activity that is demanding and time consuming.

Furthermore, he identifies management-related problems to include: the virtual impossibility of correcting each learner's work, difficulties in organizing team work, high noise level that could be distractive to many learners in and out of classroom, acute problem of indiscipline, and so on. Other noticeable problems include difficulties in learning the names of all the learners in a large class, the near impossibility of establishing good rapport with all the learners, difficulty in identifying who is following the lesson and who is lost, difficulty in sustaining attention of all the learners, as well as problems with determining or assessing the level of a learner's interest in the class.

Keng (2004) notes that the problems associated with large class include dealing with how to encourage attendance, how to prevent academic dishonesty, how to get feedback from all students about the course and how to make a large class interactive. In the same vein, Shamin (1996) examines the problems of learning environment in a large language classroom. She found that the overcrowded nature of many large language classes in a school in Pakistan often restricted teacher movement in the classroom. It confined many teachers to operate from the front centers of the classrooms. Consequently, the front of the classroom becomes the teacher's action zone while the back of the classroom recedes to "outside" the teacher's "attention zone". She notes that this "seems to affects the behavior of students in different locations- in the front or back- of the classroom" (1996:77). And because of this many students see the back of the class as a hiding place, especially when they don't want to get involved in classroom activities. Many students prefer to sit at the back when they are either tired before they come to class or when they don't find the class so interesting or when they are not prepared for it. Recently, one of the authors of this paper eavesdropped on a student who sat at the back corner of the class telling her friend/course mate that: "I want to sleep in class today and this is why I chose this back location." Thus, many students sit in the back to get out of the "teachers' range," so that they can feel free to indulge in non productive activities such as sleeping, silent talk with a friend or do other work while the teacher is teaching in the front.

According to Shamin (1996), the back of the class is a place of refuge, a place to hide from the teacher. Furthermore, she notes that the back of the class seems to have its own non-participating culture, which members often find difficult to break.

3. Some ways of coping with large language class

In this sub-section I would like to discuss how to manage some of the problems associated with teaching and learning in a large language class. I will attempt to answer the following basic questions on ways of handling large classes:

1. *How can a teacher give learners more opportunities for active participation in a large class?*
2. *How can a teacher keep down the noise level?*
3. *How can a teacher create good rapport with every learner?*
4. *How to develop ways of assessing all learners' work and provide adequate, timely and sufficient feedback to every learner in a large language class?*

Let us begin with the first question, which is about ways of creating more opportunities for learners to practice the target language. Keng (2004) reports that in a bid to stimulate students' interest and hold their attention for the entire class period, he adopted a participatory workshop-lecture teaching technique where interactions between the teacher and students as well as amongst students are encouraged. He further explains:

> ***"By working through the notes, the students are not only actively engaged throughout the lecture, but also given the opportunity to think at each step and literally learn on the spot. Short concept quizzes with multiple choice answers are also posed at appropriate moments and students are encouraged to discuss with one another to arrive at the correct answers to these quizzes." (Keng 2004:2).***

In a Project Based Learning, Sarwar (2001) found that exposing learners to meaningful use of the target language outside the classroom provides an effective way of addressing the challenges of language teaching in a large class. Provide opportunities to learners to practice the target language in and out of the classroom. Her study which was done in a large English as a second language class exposes learners "to methods and advantages of independent learning and encourages them to form their own groups". She reported how this strategy "built up students' self-esteem, developed independent learning habits, and created rapport in the classroom." (Sarwar 2001:499).

Another way of handling large classes is through the assignment of group work. Many teachers worry about doing group work with a large class. They think group work means a lot of noise, and they don't also know how to assess each learner's work directly in the class when the whole group is doing something together. If a teacher has a large class, group work can be helpful. If learners work in groups, they can ask each other for help; those learners who understand the work will improve their own skills by showing other learners how to do things. Also, it provides an opportunity for all learners to get involved in classroom activities. Often, learners who are quiet and passive in the class will be active in a small group, and this can help a teacher to see what their real abilities are. It teaches learners how to share ideas, help each other and work together to achieve something that no learner could achieve alone.

This take us to the second question, how to keep learners "on task" and keep them from using their first language (L1). According to Yuan-Ying (2005), assigning roles to every group member as the chair, secretary, editor, timekeeper, etc. of the group can make the learners to assume full responsibility for their own learning and make controlling and monitoring of the class less burdensome.

Furthermore, when a group has to complete a task together, the members of the group often take responsibility for keeping control, making sure that everyone contributes and that the task gets done. In this way, a teacher doesn't have to "police" the class all the time.

Another way in which a teacher can encourage participation in a large language class is by introducing the policy of assigning grades based on classroom participation. Although, keeping record of every learner's level of participation in a large class is not always possible, it can help to encourage reluctant speakers and learners with low motivation to actively participate in classroom activities in order to earn good grades. Many learners want good grades and this can encourage them to actively participate in classroom activities. However, to implement this policy a teacher should clearly define classroom activities and the criteria for grading classroom participation, as well as the assumption behind his action. He should also find the best way of recording each learner's level of participation. A teacher can maintain a class register to record the number of times each learner participates in the class. He can also prepare cards to give to a learner whenever he contributes to class activity and at the end of the class ask the learners to return the cards and

record how many cards each learner has based on the number of times he contributed to class activity/discussion.

Another strategy is teacher movement in the classroom, which can be an effective strategy for monitoring and providing help to learners who get stuck or experience difficulties in performing a task.

This strategy can also apply to the question of creating rapport in the classroom. Teacher movement can be a good way of getting connected to every learner in the classroom. This is because, the more a teacher moves around the classroom, the more he will discover new faces in the class. It is therefore, recommended for teachers to organize the sitting arrangement of the learners to allow them to move freely around the classroom.

Again, we should recognize the fact that teacher movement in a classroom has the effect of making learners to feel the presence of the teacher. This can make them concentrate on the lesson and actively participate in the classroom activities since they will become more sensitive to the teacher's constant focus on them.

A teacher can establish good rapport with the students and make his class more personal by trying to talk one-on-one to as many students as he can. For example, a teacher can come to class 10 minutes early so that he can chat with the students before the class begins. The conversation can be about anything, academic, personal etc. At least, if a teacher can greet every student individually, even if it is just through eye contact, a smile or a simple hello, this can help him/her to connect with each student in the class. Furthermore, teachers should respect all the students and never stereotype them according to their various locations in the front or the back of the classroom. Teachers need to recognize the fact that if we give our students equal learning opportunities in the classroom, many of them can do well regardless of sitting in the front or the back.

According to Enerson (1997:23), "large classes work best when students take an active interest in the subject and when teachers personalize their presentations and respect students". This should make sense because getting students' interest is crucial in second language learning. Once a student is interested in either the teacher or the subject or the teacher's presentation or both, then there is high tendency for that student to take an active interest in classroom activities. For instance, Shamin (1996) observes that learners who do not want to actively participate in classroom activities tend to sit in the front. She quotes a students saying "she is my favorite teacher and I enjoy studying

in her class". This shows that the more we make our students interested in us or our subject, the more they get involved in classroom activities.

Finally, on the issue of ways of assessing all learners' work in a large language class (i.e., Question four), I think a teacher can try pair-marking, to ask the students to mark each other's work based on certain clear criteria and monitor how they are doing it and if possible moderate the students' marking later. However, this does not mean a teacher should stop marking learners work at all. As often as possible, the teacher should try to collect all the learners' work to mark himself. Also, in introducing this pair-marking, a teacher should explain the reason or assumption behind his action.

4. Conclusion

The teaching of large ESL classes is truly challenging and requires more conscious effort and planning in order to make learning and teaching more effective in such classroom environment. Indeed, as Stanley and Porter (2002:15) have argued, teaching large ESL classes can be as "stimulating and rewarding as small ones" by making a few adjustments: with free teacher movement in the classroom, by organizing group or team work, encouraging students to be key players in directing their own learning, using tools and technologies that allow students to find course information, turn in assignment, or take quizzes online; addressing diverse learning styles; respecting each students and creating rapport.

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