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Obstacles of Teaching Language in Large Classes in a Public University of Afghanistan: A Language Instructor's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This case study aimed to identify obstacles a language instructor who taught in a large class faced and how he dealt with them. The participant of this study was an English teacher in a public university and the number of students he taught was more than 30, which is considered a large class for language teaching and learning. An in-depth interview and classroom observation were conducted to gain data. Analysis was done in an iterative way. This study revealed seven issues which were encountered by the participant in his class. All of which were associated with the difficulty to 1) evaluation and feedback, 2) management and discipline, 3) achieve learning effectiveness and learning outcomes, 4) engage students to the lesson 5) pay individual attention. Other issues occurring in his class were the use of mother language by the students in class and lack of motivation to learn. In order to tackle these issues, the teacher employed two strategies, namely: 1) using a variety of games and 2) communicative and collaborative task to attract students' attention.

INTRODUCTION

Large Class in EFL Context

English in Afghanistan is treated as a foreign language (FL), therefore the learners are called EFL learners. English is also made compulsory in any secondary school and higher education, thus every learner has to study English. Further, in most public universities the number of students in a class may vary. In some universities an EFL class may consist of less than 50 students, while in some other, the student's number could be more than that.

A class comprising of 30 students is considered a normal class and if it exceeds that number, then such a class could 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 constitute a large class (Hayes, 1997).

In this study, a class consisting of more than 30 students is considered a large class. The ideal number of students in one class that has been suggested is ranged from 20 to 32 students. Large class has created a number of challenges to an EFL instructors, especially in Afghanistan. These challenges have influenced the quality of language learning as well as the learning outcomes in foreign language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Predicaments of Teaching English in Large Classes

There are three commonly perceived problems associated with teaching in large classes, namely physical, psychological and technical (Xu, 2001). Xu further explained this problems in details as following: Teachers in large classes may feel physically weary; they may unwarily speak louder and move more often or longer distances

than they do in small classes etc. Psychologically, some teachers feel it intimidating to face a large "crowd" of students, especially when they don't have much idea who their students are and what their students are expecting from them. To the teachers in large classes, students are not "people" but "faces"..... Other problems such as monitoring attendance and checking assignments are also constantly worrying many teachers involved in large class teaching.

A report published by British Council (2015) showed a number of challenges in teaching English in large classes. These are:

- a) It's difficult to keep good discipline going in a large class;
- b) you have to provide for more children of different ages and different abilities, wanting to learn different things at different speeds and in different ways;
- c) You can't easily give each child the individual attention they need; and
- d) You may not have enough books or teaching and learning aids.

Other study conducted by Wang and Zang (2011) in China also investigated what Chinese English teachers experienced in large classes. Their study revealed a number of challenges that teacher faced when teaching in large classes. The Chinese teachers in their study found it difficult to:

- 1) Discipline the class, especially for primary and middle school students who are lack of self-control;
- 2) To satisfy all the needs of students who have different interests, personalities and capabilities;
- 3) To organize efficient class activities due to the constraints of time and space;
- 4) To provide equal chances for the students to participate and practice;

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5) To give timely and effective feedback and evaluation. Further, Hayes (1997) also pointed out the problems which teacher encountered in large class, namely: discomfort, control, individual attention, evaluation and learning effectiveness. These problems could be problematic to the teachers, however learners themselves might think that it is not a problem. As Xu (2011) argued that: "In fact, what the teachers perceive as problems associated with large classes sometimes may not be so problematic to the students".

One of the latest studies concerning this issue was conducted by Bahansha (2013) in Saudi Arabia. His study revealed that all participants find it daunting to teach large classes. The participant in his study also commented that the students learning outcome was unsatisfactory despite their efforts to elevate the level of language learning in such context. What the teachers urged the need to reduce the number of students in one class.

Further, his findings shed the light on some useful and effective methods to be applied in large classes which may facilitate the language teaching and learning. Another recent study in Afghanistan (Rohin, 2013) also suggested that large classes create problems in management and control of class and also, affect the students learning achievement/ outcomes. From the studies above, we can sum up some challenges which are caused by large classes. These include: discomfort, control, individual attention, evaluation 3 learning, effectiveness (Hayes, 1997), learning achievement/ outcomes (Rohin, 2013; Bahansha, 2013). Physical, psychological and technical problems (Xu, 2011).

Strategies to Handle the Issues

The following studies point out teachers' strategy to teaching English in large classes. Rohin study (2013) in Afghanistan suggested that teachers are demanded to improve their pedagogical knowledge and some effective methods such as group work, jigsaw discussion and so on. Bahansha (2013) advised the importance of exploring various methods and applying effective strategies that minimize the effects of large classes and elevating the teaching and learning level to its highest standard. Different argument is proposed by Sulistyowati (2012) who conducted a study in Indonesia by involving teachers in English for young learner's classes. The participants of her study believed that the number of students did not determine the attainment of learning outcome. However, they believed that teachers "must come up with engaging activities that keep all of their students interested and participating with the goal of improving their communication skills". Further Xu (2011) suggested that: "Technically, teachers have to be capable of using microphones and OHPs properly to make their students hear and see clearly. Inadequate use of such classroom equipment may lead to the lack of interest and involvement of the students in the classroom learning"

Research Questions

This study seeks to understand what an EFL instructor in Department of English at Al-Beroni University encountered when teaching in large class. To researcher's best knowledge, only a few studies have been carried out in Afghanistan concerning this issues despite the large number of existing studies carried out in other countries. One of these studies was conducted by Rohin (2013) who investigated the challenges to teaching English language in Afghanistan, while the current study will be conducted in a senior class of English language and literature Department of a public university. Considering the context above, the overriding questions investigated in this study were:

- 1) What challenges does an English instructor face in teaching English in a large class?; and
- 2) How does the instructor deal with those challenges in teaching English in a large class?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The current study is case study in nature as its primary aim is to gain deeper understanding on the challenges which teacher experiences when he is teaching in large classes. Zaidah (2007, 2007) argued that case study provides opportunity to collect information more deeply.

Participant

The subject of this study is an English instructor teaching in the Department of English language at Al -Beroni University in Afghanistan. The researcher chose him as the participant due to personal relation with him which allows us to gain data more easily. He has been teaching English for more than ten years. Further, he has been teaching in large classes. Other reason for choosing him to be the participant was that he was ready to be part of this research voluntarily. Further, I employed purposive sampling technique to choose the research participant. Jupp (2006) argued that purposive sampling techniques is form of a non-probability sampling in which researcher's decision to include individuals as research participants are based upon based upon a variety of criteria which may include specialist knowledge of the research issue, or capacity and willingness to participate in the research.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Primary data was collected from teacher's personal opinion and secondary data was from classroom observation or other written and published documents relevant to this study. For this study, in-depth interviews and classroom observations were employed to the participant to gain supporting data. In qualitative study, researcher will be the main instrument. The interview was recorded after having consent from the participants involved. Collected data were analyzed simultaneously as the data collection in progress because this is the common practice in qualitative study. O'Connor and Gibson (n.d)

suggested the following steps to analyze qualitative data which include

- Organizing the data,
- Finding and organizing ideas and concepts,
- Building overarching themes in the data,
- Ensuring reliability and validity in the data analysis and in the findings,
- Finding possible and plausible explanations for findings, and
- An overview of the final steps.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges of Instructor in Large Classes

The purpose of this study was to identify what challenges an EFL instructor encountered in a large class. Sulistoyawati (2012) argued that the ideal number of students in one class that has been suggested is ranged from 20 to 32 students. As the class where this teacher

taught was more than 32 students, then it was classified into large class. A large body of studies suggested that teaching in English in a large class may create an array of problems.

As reported by British Council (2015), teaching English in large classes would result in the difficulty to keep good discipline, to provide for more students of different ages and different abilities, wanting to learn different things at different speeds and in different ways, to give each learner the individual attention they need; and to provide enough books or teaching and learning aids.

As a result, all of these problems could influence the learning process and affect the attainment of the learning outcomes. Further, these issues would cause problems for teachers to organize efficient class activities due to the constraints of time and space. The following chart summarizes the findings of this study.

From interview with the EFL instructor, there were a

Challenges of Large Classes	Evaluation and providing feedback
	Discipline
	Learning effectiveness
	Engaging students
	Use of local language
	Low motivation
	Individual feedback

Figure 1: Challenges teacher encountered in a big class

number of issues which he encountered when he was teaching. First, the students were noisy and the teacher was unable to control the students. When I observed the classes, I saw some students were making noise. They did not pay attention to the teacher's explanation. Although the teacher had tried to remind them and to get their attention frequently, the students would stop for a while and made noise again. When they were doing so, they disturbed other students. According to the teacher, this happened almost in every session.

These findings are in agreement with Wang and Zang's (2011) findings. The teachers in their study were found to have difficulty to discipline the class. Although teachers have made rule in English class, such a regulation did not work as the number of students in the class was too many. As a result, the teacher found it difficult to get everyone's attention and to get engaged optimally. Final consequence of this issue is that the learning process would not be effective. For instance, it would influence the students' learning outcomes and teachers' personal goals.

Secondly, my interview and observation showed that the students were not motivated to learn English. This might be caused by the status of English as a foreign language in Afghanistan's education system, where learning English is not students' choice, instead it is a must and every university student has to take it. If English becomes an optional language, then only those with high interest

would learn it. If this happens, EFL teachers would find teaching English interesting as his students have intrinsic motivation to learn. Further, the students' lack of interest in learning English caused them to be lazy to learn English. Other consequence of this is that students did not pay attention when their teacher explained the materials.

Wang and Zang's study (2011) highlighted that Chinese teachers teaching in English in large classes believed they encountered an issue to give timely and effective feedback and evaluation. This is also the case in this study in which the teacher of this study believed that it was difficult for him to assess the whole students' learning progress because of the class size. For instance, if he wanted to measure students' speaking skills or to check students' writing, he would spend too much time because assessing those skills requiring personal feedback. Xu (2011) also claimed that large classes would cause problems such as "monitoring attendance and checking assignments".

This finding also supported Hayes's study (1997) who pointed out that teachers teaching in large classes were worried if they were unable to check all of the students' works. Hayes's study (ibid) revealed that large classes would make teachers in EFL classes unable to pay individual attention to all learners. In this study, the same issue also occurred and the respondent admitted that he found it challenging to pay attention to each student in this class.

This finding also is in line with that of the study by British council (2015) as stated that large class would make teacher difficult to give each individual to pay attention they need. Wang and Zang further (2011) mentioned that Chinese teachers in their study were unable to provide equal chances for the students to participate and practice as well as to satisfy all the needs of students who have different interests, personalities and capabilities. The failure to pay attention to each student would generate another problem. In this study the teacher admitted that most of the students in his English classes were passive when he was teaching listening and speaking. There were only a few of them responding to his questions. We could also observe this reality in his classroom in which only a few students in the front rows would answer his questions or to give questions.

Another finding revealed from interview and observation was that the large class size influenced the students' preference to use the local language (Dari Farsi language). As the teacher respondent said that the students in his class preferred to speak local language to practicing English. Probably this was caused by the less chance provided by the teacher for the students to practice in English in his class.

Strategies to Respond to the Challenges

From the interviews and classroom observation, it was identified that there were only two strategies which he preferred to respond to the problems. First, he employed a variety of games and second he used communicative activities and collaborative learning techniques to attract students' attention and get them involved in the lessons. He found that these strategies useful to deal with the barriers occurring in that large class.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion of this study revealed seven challenges which the instructor encountered when he was teaching English in large classes. These difficulties are related to

- 1) Evaluation and providing individual feedback,
- 2) Management and discipline),
- 3) Learning effectiveness and learning outcomes,
- 4) Engaging students to the lesson,
- 5) The use of local language by the students,
- 6) Lack of motivation to learn English and
- 7) Pay individual attention.

The findings of this study are in agreement with other studies such as report by British Council (2015), Zang and Wang (2011) and Xu (2011). In order to tackle these issues, the teacher employed two strategies. These are

- 1) Using a variety of games and
- 2) Using communicative activities and collaborative learning techniques in order to get students' involved in the lessons.

RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study may not shed a new insight

on this issue, however this study would provide a good practical feedback to the teacher and to other English teachers especially for those teaching in similar context, in large classes. Further, from this study I would assume that large classes might not be the single cause of the learning ineffectiveness, low students outcomes or students interest in learning English. These could also be caused by the lack of facilities or teachers methods in teaching. Therefore, it is worth improving teaching strategies to deal with these issues. Further it is also worth considering a wider study, for instance in one regency, to investigate general issues experienced by English teachers.

Limitation of the study Due to the time constraint of conducting interviews and observation, this study might miss some more vital causes of why large classes became so challenging to the respondent of this study. I would argue that there might be other reasons why teachers believe that large classes as the major cause of teachers' difficulty in teaching English. Also, we perceived that all of these challenges might have connection.

In other words, some problems could be caused by a single problem and a single effect could be triggered by a number of causes. To put it simply, although the findings of this study have uncovered the teachers' obstacles in teaching English in large classes, further study needs to be done in order to find the relation or connection of each issues and to identify what the most appropriate way to tackle them. Finally this case study was not meant to generalize findings, thus it did not reflect the situation of other public universities. However, this study can be transferred to other research contexts which have similar social features.

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