

A Book of Reading in

# INSTRUCTIONAL PEDAGOGY



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# Chapter 11

## Improving English Language Teaching in Large Class Size

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### **Learning Objectives**

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- *Define what constitutes a large class*
- *Share your experience of teaching/learning in a large class*
- *Explain the impacts of large classes in language teaching*
- *Explain teaching and learning problems associated with large class*
- *Suggest means and strategies for coping with large class*
- *Provide measures for exploiting large class size to facilitate efficient learning*

### **Introduction**

The phenomenon of large language learning classrooms in Nigeria is tied to two broad and related factors: worldwide introduction of universal education and rapid increase in population. Society's realization of the impact of formal education coupled with government efforts at various levels to ensure mass education of Nigerians have contributed to the phenomenon of large class size in schools. Other vital contributory factors include inadequate provision of the needed human and infrastructural resources to commensurate with the people's desire and government's efforts at ensuring mass educational delivery. Large class is therefore the result of a high demand for education with no corresponding provision of the needed resources. Such resources include inadequate qualified teachers, insufficient classrooms, and inadequate teaching materials, among others. The situation is serious in English language classes



since English is not only a subject but also the language of instruction across all the levels of the Nigeria educational system. That is to say language classes, particularly English, are large in primary, secondary schools and all tertiary institutions. For instance, in primary and secondary schools, there are classes of over eighty to ninety students while in tertiary institutions e.g. GST 110 (Use of English) in my university has class of three hundred students. This situation is bound to have many negative effects on the students, the teacher, and the educational system itself. The solution to this problem may not be immediate therefore the paper aims to provide worthwhile suggestions and strategies for tackling the challenges of teaching and learning English in large or overpopulated class size.

### **What is large class?**

People's views about what an ideal class size should be vary from one context to another. Several studies have expressed different views about what constitute small or large class. For instance, the land mark study by Glass and Smith in their 1998 study stressed that class size should be an avenue for better performance in academic activities. The research viewed a number of research reports on the relationship of size of the class and the performance of students and discovered that (1) as the size of the class reduces, the performance of students improves (2) more benefits emerge as the size of the class reduces to less than 20 students. Tennessee's project STAR (Fin, 2002) also discovered that students in less populated classrooms performed better than those in "large classes throughout the K-3 grades". The study therefore recommends a "class size of no more than 18 students per teacher to produce the greater benefits and several other students such as Student Achievement Guarantee-SAGE 1996-1998, Project STAR, California's CSF Programme consider small class to be an average class of between 13 and 20 students while a class size of between 22 and 28 is considered large.

In Lancaster University project, 50 students in a class is considered to be large (Coleman 1989), while in China, large class generally refers to a class of between 50-100 students or more. This, to some foreign teachers may be considered as too large. In Nigeria context, the concept of large cuts across different educational levels, from primary through secondary to tertiary. It is therefore not strange to see a class of over eighty pupils in a primary or secondary school receiving lessons. In universities, a large class can have more than three hundred students seated in a large hall to receive lectures from a



lecturer. A typical example is a general studies class, like GST 110 and 121 titled Use of English and Library I and Use of English 2 respectively, where the entire population of students admitted in an academic session are divided into a few groups to receive lectures. In this situation, if over three thousand students are admitted, a class size of over three hundred students is expected. Ur (1996) therefore concludes that, a class is large if the teacher cannot cope with the students' population and teaching materials cannot cater for the population.

### **Problems of Teaching in Large Class**

Hanushek (1995) opines that one of the problems facing large classrooms is quality and quantity of learning materials available to students. Some of such include furniture such as desks, chairs; textbooks, and other teaching and learning materials. The phenomenon of large class varies from individual to individual; therefore there is no consensus on the issue and its impacts on students' learning. Based on complaints and views of English language teachers, the problems of teaching in large classes can be grouped into five categories: (1) challenges caused by physical problems; (2) Class control and problems of ensuring class discipline; (3) Lack of contact between the teacher and individual students; (4) Difficulties in testing and administering evaluation questions on students; (5) Problems of ensuring effective teaching and learning. Harmer (2000) also finds out that "large classes bring difficulties to both teachers and students and to the process of teaching and learning. These difficulties include: inability of teachers to have contact with the students sitting at the back and for students to get the individual attention; difficulty or impossibility of organizing creative and dynamic teaching and learning sessions; large classes are especially frustrating for teachers lacking experience in teaching. There is, therefore, the need for more technical teaching strategies by teachers involved in teaching in large classes". Locastro (2001) "summarizes the problems of teaching large classes as pedagogical, management-related and affective". Zhang Jiamin (2002) stressed that discipline problems, ineffective learning and weariness, are some of the problems confronting teaching in large or over-populated classes. Yu Jianqiong's (2004) views on problems of teaching in large classes include ignoring students' individual differences and the worrying nature of the teaching and learning environment. She also adds that the limited chance given to students to practice English hinders the improvement of their oral English. In summary it is discovered that teaching large classes makes it difficult for teachers (1) to discipline the class, especially primary and lower school students who lack 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; (5) to give timely and effective feedback and evaluation. In addition, the writer's experience of large class shows that the teacher has to put in tremendous effort to be able to teach in large class. In fact, teaching in large language class, especially the Nigeria type is energy sapping.

### **Advantages of Teaching in Large Class**

Some researchers such as Ur (2000) and Hess (2001) argue that large classes can provide greater opportunities for creativity and richer human resources than smaller classes. Xu (2001) also says more students' population means more ideas, and therefore, provide more possibilities and opinions. Qi Li and Wang Jiana (2009) provided three more advantages of large classes such as that they can provide more opportunities for interaction between students, foster an atmosphere that allows cooperation and encourages creativity and innovation. Therefore large classes bring not only challenges but also opportunities for teachers: It is the teaching methodology rather than class size that mostly contributes to the efficacy of teaching

### **Principles and Strategies of Teaching in Large Class**

Many studies on teaching large classes have explored the principles and strategies of teaching in such situation based on the understanding of the challenges and advantages of large class. For example, Wang Jianxin and several other researchers in Beijing University of Posts and Communications explore the practical strategies through a longitudinal case study in order to meet the challenges of teaching college English reading course in large class, including (1) how to strengthen cooperation and communication; (2) how to apply multimedia instruction efficiently; (3) how to encourage creative teaching; (4) how to organize learner-centred discussions and activities; (5) how to strengthen the management of the students sitting at the back. These challenges are mostly caused by pedagogical or management-related problems and can be solved by developing an instructional strategy, like proper use of multimedia. Therefore, experiment on the use of multimedia instruction has proved successful and encouraging. Many useful suggestions have also been proposed and tried by Chinese researchers and teachers with the most frequently discussed being in accordance with students' level, cooperative learning and



multimedia instruction. The following is a summary of some of the teaching principles and strategies.

**Affective:** These are principles and strategies that have to do with teachers and students' emotions. They specify that:

1. The teacher should know the students very well by collecting their personal information through their portfolio and by asking students to answer questions in class by calling their names;
2. There should be good rapport with students by communicating with them frequently, giving feedback in time as well as creating relaxed and conducive classroom environment;
3. The teacher should show concern for both strong and weak students by providing them with equal opportunity to ask or answer question as well as giving different tasks or assignments according to their intellectual levels;
4. The teacher should arouse the students' interests by enhancing expressive capability by talking humorously or using facial expression as well as using different teaching aids and methods such as pictures, music, movies. Also, various teaching activities such as games, role plays, and contests should be used.

**Group work:** there is the need for students to work in small groups while other students sit around in a circle so as to have a chance to participate actively. The teacher could also split the class into weak and intelligent students so as to make it possible for him/her to concentrate on the weaker students. However, care should be taken so as not to create a problem of inferiority complex between the weak and the more intelligent students. According to Xu (2007), "the teachers' skill in classroom management is the primary ingredient for success with group work in large classes". Passigna (1997) also offered some suggestions on how to manage large classrooms which can be organized into three categories; such as groupings, classroom management, and remedial/enrichment activities. Passigna stresses that the strategic grouping of pupils is fundamental to teaching in large classrooms and suggests that when class sizes enlarge, and new or difficult information is being taught, the class should be divided into groups of 15 to 20 pupils. After that, teacher-led instruction should begin at the small group-level while the other groups are given practice exercises to do from the previous day's lesson without the teacher. Also, pupils should be given the opportunities to lead the groups in order to familiarize them with group work and ensure that



pupils help the teacher to lead group-based exercises. Passigna also suggests several methods to effectively manage a large classroom. Her first suggestion is to establish simple rules for acceptable group behaviour. Such behaviours include: how to speak softly, take turns in communication and how to work together. In addition, certain classroom activities can be routinized, such as how to enter and leave the classroom when classes start both at recess and when classes end; how to assist in handing out books, papers, assignments and other materials; how to pass materials to the front and then to the teacher; and how to keep the classroom neat. In performing these tasks efficiently, more time can be spent on instruction and school assignments, rather than on managing disruptions. In any classroom, there are different ability levels that must be accommodated through remediation and/or enrichment activities. On organizing remedial and enrichment activities to suit diverse student needs, Passigna opines that students in need of remediation should be placed into small groups, or in pairs. Those students with similar needs (e.g., reading remediation) should be grouped in homogenous groups or pairs (i.e., similar ability levels). In other cases of remediation and enrichment activities, teachers should make use of other persons such as community volunteers, retired teachers as well as students from higher grades and high school graduates to assist with enrichment activities while only the teacher should provide tutoring services.

### **The Use of Technology in teaching large class**

Rhalmi (2013) emphasized that technology ensures that everyone has time to connect with the teacher. Teachers should therefore do the following:

1. A blog or a wiki should be created for students and the teacher to meet at home.
2. Students should be encouraged to create emails to make it easier for teachers to connect with other students outside the class.
3. Power Point with very simple and heavily guided activities should be used in instructional delivery especially at lower level.
4. Classroom communication systems should be used to help both the teacher and the students to assess their learning as the lessons progress even before the next quiz or exam. With these electronic response systems students can offer response to multiple-choice questions posed from the course material. The instantaneous feedback allows students who get the wrong answer to ask for further information immediately.



### **Encouraging attendance in large classes**

1. The class should be made interesting, informative and relevant to the lives and aspirations of the students by including varieties such as entertainment to lectures. Activities should involve the use of animations, slide shows, video clips, recorders and the use of guest speakers.
2. General information should be supported by a lot of supplementary illustrations or examples as well as lots of exam-directed problems.
3. Final grade should emerge through emphasis on class participation and quizzes.
4. Students should be given topics to think about or a puzzle to solve to provide avenue for discussion in the class.
6. More scheduled exams that would cover less material should be given by the teacher.
7. The teacher should give weekly class works emanating from the previous lessons should be given to the students. Also, the class work and homework should be given, collected and assessed at the appropriate time.
8. The teacher should also stress the importance of class attendance and its importance in examination success. The policy that the more the number of lectures missed the lower the examination grade should be established.

### **Activities for effective teaching and learning in large class**

The following activities are important for effective teaching and learning in large class.

1. At the beginning of the lecture, the teacher should tell the class how lecture will be organized and give a brief outline on the topic of the day to help students brainstorm on the topic.
2. The students should get a piece of paper and in two minutes, summarize the main points of the lecture or note any part of the lecture that is not clear to them. The teacher should collect these papers and use them as feedback to project problem areas.



4. The teacher should give students practice in remembering the lecture by asking questions or providing quizzes in the course of the lecture or at the end of the lecture.
5. The teacher should provide important signposts or hints of the lecture to enable students remember important points.
6. The lesson should be concluded in an orderly manner by summarizing the day's work and writing the instructions for the day's homework.
7. The teacher should use lots of examples and images when explaining important concepts and principles.
7. A non-stop lecturing method should be avoided; the lectures should be divided into short segments to give room for comprehension and remembering.
8. The teacher should device means of getting closer to students especially those asking questions. He should also walk around the classroom instead of staying on the same spot and be enthusiastic and expressive when lecturing.
9. Visual aids, films, overhead projector, computer graphics, pictures and even guest lecturers should be used while lecturing.(Richards and Rodgers, 2001).
10. Active participation by students during the course of the lecture should be encouraged. The students should be trained to work out problems, answer multiple choice questions which are inserted periodically and rapid questions should be asked to keep every student alert and busy. The teacher should direct questions at students who show signs of lack of interest or engage in other things. Also, the method of asking questions should be the one that covers the whole classroom and questions should be asked before students are called to answer them so that every student listens and pays attention.
11. The teacher should discourage continuous note-taking when lecture is going on, by allotting special times for taking notes or provide lecture handouts.
12. At the end of the class, the important points which were covered during the lecture should be summarized and the students should be given some idea of what to look forward to for the next lecture.



## Developing good discipline in a large class

The most prominent ways of developing good discipline in a large class are:

1. A code of behaviour that is created by teacher and students should be established. The code of behaviour should state basic rules of conduct that learners would understand, such as; working quietly; not talking loudly; reading a book by students who have finished the lesson tasks to keep them busy (Nolasco & Albert, 1991).
2. The environment and experiences outside the class should be used to provide a new and different space especially when students get noisy or bored and to reduce overcrowding. The teacher should also insist that students attract his attention by raising their hands and always wait for silence before speaking once the lesson is in progress.
3. The teacher should collaborate with the students to build up a good and lively learning atmosphere in large classes. Xu (2007) reiterates that many teachers held the view that a good class has an atmosphere of a feeling of warmth, mutual support, an absence of fear, a feeling of comfort, mutual respect, people mindful of other people's abilities and limitations, a feeling of cooperation and a feeling of trust, *et cetera*.
6. The teacher should take advantage of the size of the large classes, seek the experience of people who have been teaching in large classes to show that it is not only possible to build up a good learning atmosphere in large classes, but also feasible to take advantage of the large class size. Nolasco and Arthur (1991) opine that large classes can be of great advantage through the following:
  - a. The more students, the more ideas, and the more lively the class.
  - b. The more students, the more interrelated and the more unified the class.
  - c. The more students, the more competition, and the more positively motivated the class.
7. Teachers of large class should communicate, discuss and share the experience of the classroom management techniques with other teachers who are involved in teaching in large classes (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).



## **Conclusion**

The chapter has discussed language teaching in large class size, characteristic of language teaching situations in developing countries like Nigeria. A large class may contain as much as fifty to eighty students in primary and secondary schools and even more than that in tertiary institutions, such as university. Language in an ideal situation is supposed to be taught in small and manageable class size so as to ensure close supervision of students by the teacher as they learn as well as active participation of students in class activities. Therefore, teaching language in large class as we have it today requires some principles and strategies that would address the challenges posed by this trend. The chapter highlighted some of these challenges such as discipline and academic set back suffered by both the students and the teacher and recommended strategies such as strengthening communication and cooperation between the teacher and students, applying technology in instruction efficiently, enhancing creative teaching, organizing learner-centred discussions and activities and ensuring discipline and active students participation in classroom activities, among others. These strategies if well executed would make language teaching in large class an interesting exercise hence, the phenomenon of large classes has come to stay and may not be eliminated in the near future.

## **Evaluation Exercises**

Define large class.

What are the problems of teaching in large class?

Explain the benefits of teaching English in large class.

How would you explain discipline in large class?

Suggest ways or strategies for effective teaching in large class.

Identify the role of technology in teaching English in large class.

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