

# Appropriate Methodology in Large Classes

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## Abstract

Many teachers experience a mismatch between their methodological training and the demands of teaching in a large class. This study explores ways in which methodologies appropriate for large classes can be developed. It proposes that the starting point must be teachers' reactions to their large classes. However, it is not sufficient for teachers to interpret, even in a contextually sensitive way, methodologies which are essentially alien. Rather, if they are to come to terms with their large classes, it is essential for teachers to derive methodologies from within their large classes.

*De nombreux professeurs vivent un conflit entre leur formation méthodologique et les exigences de l'enseignement dans une classe à grand effectif. Cet étude analyse comment mettre au point des méthodologies convenant aux classes nombreuses. Elle propose de partir des réactions des professeurs à l'égard de leurs classes. Cependant il ne suffit pas que les professeurs se contentent, même en tenant compte du contexte, de transposer des méthodologies qui viennent pour l'essentiel de l'extérieur. Pour faire face aux grands effectifs, il est essentiel qu'ils tirent de nouvelles méthodologies de leur enseignement dans ces classes.*

## Introduction

There have been calls, recently, for teachers to interpret the communicative approach in a contextually appropriate way (Holliday, 1994a; 1994b). This locally sensitive interpretation of proposals which originate from alien contexts is particularly urgently required, Holliday argues, in state schools and universities in countries other than Britain, Australasia and North America (the 'BANA' countries, as he calls them).

A significant feature of English language teaching - indeed education in general - in many non-BANA countries is that it takes place in large classes. For years, teachers have been telling us that it is not a straightforward matter for them to implement in their overcrowded and underresourced classrooms a methodology which was developed in a radically different situation. For example, a group of university English teachers in Nigeria - people whose average classes had 54 students and who frequently taught up to 200 students at a time - made the following comments (Coleman, 1989 a):

'With large classes, group work [is] difficult to be organised... since most of the time the adult students are rowdy.'

'Difficult to make use of Communicative approach to language teaching.'

'Sometimes I am not even sure if everybody is present.'

A respondent in McLeod's survey of teachers of large classes in several African countries (McLeod, 1989) observed:

'I tend to avoid complicated but potentially exciting stuff because of the horrendous task of setting it up with a large class.'

Even more revealing are the comments of a group of South African primary school teachers, analysed by Peachey (1989). On average, the classes taught by these teachers had 51 pupils, and several classes had as many as 80 to 90 children. The teachers in her survey had recently completed a short course on language teaching methodology at a British university in which 'child-centredness' had been emphasised, and they were preparing to return to their classrooms. How did they relish this prospect?

'We would like to be given a chance of teaching small classes to implement our new skills.'

'If I want to achieve my system of child-centredness how can I go about it in [a] large class of 80 pupils?'

In other words, the teachers did not appear to see their new methodology as an **enabling** mechanism which would help them when they returned to their classes. Quite the opposite, for now they were beginning to see their classrooms as **problems**, as obstacles to the implementation of the new methodology. Peachey (1989:29) comments:

To what extent do training courses of the type which these respondents had been attending actually enable participants to cope with real

problems when they return home? Is there a danger - as these quotations perhaps indicate - that overseas training may even be estranging teachers from their teaching situations?

In fact, an awareness that teachers themselves perceived there to be a mismatch between their methodological training and the large-class realities of their teaching situation was one of the most important factors which led to the establishment of the Large Classes research project. Coleman (1989b:4-5), reflecting on the experiences of his Indonesian colleagues who had studied in the West, explained:

I could detect a strong feeling among colleagues who had returned from diploma- or masters-level training overseas that what they had been presented with during their time abroad had been interesting - but idealistic and not grounded in the realities of teaching life... there was no way in which most of those ideas could be implemented in their own contexts... It was predominantly the question of large classes which teachers brought up when they discussed the unreal idealism of the training which they had received in Britain, Australia or the United States... [Thus] American, Australian and British institutions are perceived by many overseas teachers as offering courses which are not grounded in the difficult realities of classroom life - specifically, that these courses do not take into account the characteristics of large classes.

In the rest of this paper I intend to explore ways in which we can develop methodologies which are appropriate for large classes. I will do this primarily by looking at the reactions of teachers to their large classes. (I also believe that we can learn a great deal from careful examination of the experiences and the behaviour of the learners in the same large classes; see, for example, Coleman 1993.) In carrying out this investigation of teachers' reactions, I will be arguing that it is not even sufficient for teachers to **interpret** in a contextually sensitive way methodologies which are essentially alien. Rather, if they are to come to terms with their large classes, it is essential for teachers to **derive** methodologies **from within** their large classes.

### Teachers and their large classes

'Large' is a relative concept. When systematic investigation of the experiences of teachers of large ELT classes began, we hypothesised that there must be universals in the problems which teachers experience. Thus McLeod (1989) argued that all the difficulties encountered by teachers of English in large classes can be summarised under three headings:

- affect
- effect
- effort.

Meanwhile, Coleman (1990) suggested that 'the major problems which teachers report in most large class situations' can be encapsulated in the following list:

- discomfort
- control
- evaluation
- individual attention
- learning

However, it has gradually become apparent that - even though groups of teachers teaching in similar types of institution in the same geographical area do indeed tend to share the same perceptions of the characteristics of the large classes which they teach - there are at the same time distinctive and significant differences between the perceptions of teachers who work in different types of institution and in different parts of the world. We can illustrate the fact that such differences exist by looking at three cases: primary school English teaching in Malaysia, secondary school English teaching in Pakistan, and university level English teaching in Nigeria.

The experiences and attitudes of 38 primary school teachers of English in Sabah, East Malaysia, were studied by Coleman (1991). Their normal class size averaged 43.5, and their largest classes sometimes reached 60. These teachers felt that their classes were large and problematic. Between them they identified 124 problems which were caused by the size of the class, and these problems fell very clearly into four major categories:

- control and discipline (27% of all the reported problems)

- paying attention to individuals (16%)
- helping weaker learners (10%)
- preparing teaching materials (10%)

Other problems, such as noise, restricted movement, forming groups, etc. accounted for the remaining 37% of their responses.

Shamim (1993) examined the experiences of 20 secondary school teachers of English in Karachi, Pakistan. She found that teachers in government schools were teaching classes of 50, on average, but that some classes had as many as 93 pupils on the register. In an in-depth qualitative investigation of the difficulties which these teachers experienced, Shamim found that they reported problems in four major areas:

- physical conditions in the classroom (movement may be restricted, learners may not be able to see the blackboard, etc.)
- teacher stress and workload (a large amount of marking may be required, for example)
- learner motivation and 'time on task' (learners may be tempted to engage in non-essential activities if they believe that they are not being constantly monitored by the teacher)
- opportunities for teaching and learning in the classroom (that is to say, large classes place restrictions on the sorts of teaching/learning activities which can be employed).

Contrast these findings from primary schools in Malaysia and secondary schools in Pakistan with the results of a survey of 33 university lecturers of English in Nigeria (Coleman 1989a). On average, as we saw earlier, the Nigerian teachers had 54 students in a class, but they often faced up to 200. They reported a total of 143 difficulties in their large classes; these fell into five major categories.

- paying attention to individuals (22% of all the reported problems)
- control (18%)
- evaluating students' work and giving feedback (16%)
- feeling uncomfortable (8%)
- providing enough copies of teaching materials (8%)

The remaining 28% of the responses mentioned a range of miscellaneous problems, such as physical constraints, doubts about the effectiveness of teaching, difficulty in getting students to interact, and so on.

There are some similarities, certainly, between the problems identified by the teachers in these three very different contexts. But these similarities should not obscure the fact that different large class contexts give rise to different problems - or, at the very least, different **constellations** of problems - for the teachers working in them. Now, if this is the case, then, logically, each problematic large class situation demands its own unique solution.

### **A process for rethinking large class management**

How, then, are we to move forward? It appears unavoidable that each large class context must be subjected to detailed investigation. This might be carried out by outsiders, as in the Malaysian, Pakistani and Nigerian case studies which we have been looking at. Alternatively, and more desirably, the investigation should be performed by the large-class teacher himself/herself working alone, or - and even more appropriately - with a group of colleagues who teach in the same institution or in a number of similar institutions. The work of Naidu et al. (1992) is an excellent illustration of this process of teachers working together to understand their large classes of over 100 pre-university students in South India. Another example is Yap's (1994) study of how she worked with one of the teachers in the Malaysian secondary school of which she is Principal, to analyse the parameters of a class of 65 learners and develop a novel approach to classroom management. This contextualised and investigative approach was also the philosophy which underlay the British Council's Seminar on ELT in Large Classes: Investigation and Management, held at the University of Leeds in September 1992.

The investigation will need to include at least the following stages:

1. define parameters (i.e. collect information about the number of learners in the average class and about the teachers' perceptions of class size)
2. identify, as precisely as possible, the difficulties which teachers encounter
3. derive principles for rethinking the management of the large class, based on the detailed inventory of teachers' problems, drawing on stage 2

4. build up a realistic picture - the potentialities and constraints - of the teaching context (in addition to the class size features)
5. always bearing in mind the realities of the teaching context (identified in stage 4), interpret the management principles derived at stage 3 and implement this interpretation in a specific classroom.

This process is summarised in Figure 1. The final stage (stage 6) consists of evaluation of the innovation, but it is important to bear in mind that we cannot predict exactly what the outcome of the evaluation will be. It may be that we will need to reconsider the way in which the principles have been interpreted and implemented, or we may need to reconsider the way in which the principles have been derived from the identified problems. Or - particularly if the experiment has had some success - we may have to reformulate the list of difficulties which the large class poses.

### **Putting the procedure into practice**

How does this work in practice? I would like to illustrate the procedure by describing an experience which I had in India a couple of years ago (Coleman 1994). Under the auspices of the British Council, I had the good fortune to spend five weeks travelling round India, observing English being taught in large classes in different types of institutions, talking to many teachers of large classes, discussing research in large classes, and, on a number of occasions, teaching large classes myself.

At one point during the visit I was invited to observe an English lesson being taught to a first year B.A. class in the Faculty of Arts of a Senior College in one of India's largest cities. There were 115 students on the roll, of whom approximately 65 were present at the time of my observation. The College is an English-medium institution but the majority of the students come from schools where the regional language is the medium of instruction and the rest have been educated in Hindi before entering higher education. The College has a small but dynamic team of English teachers whose job it is to provide language support to students throughout the institution. The ELT team have produced a textbook which consists of a number of prose passages, each of which is followed by a series of comprehension questions.

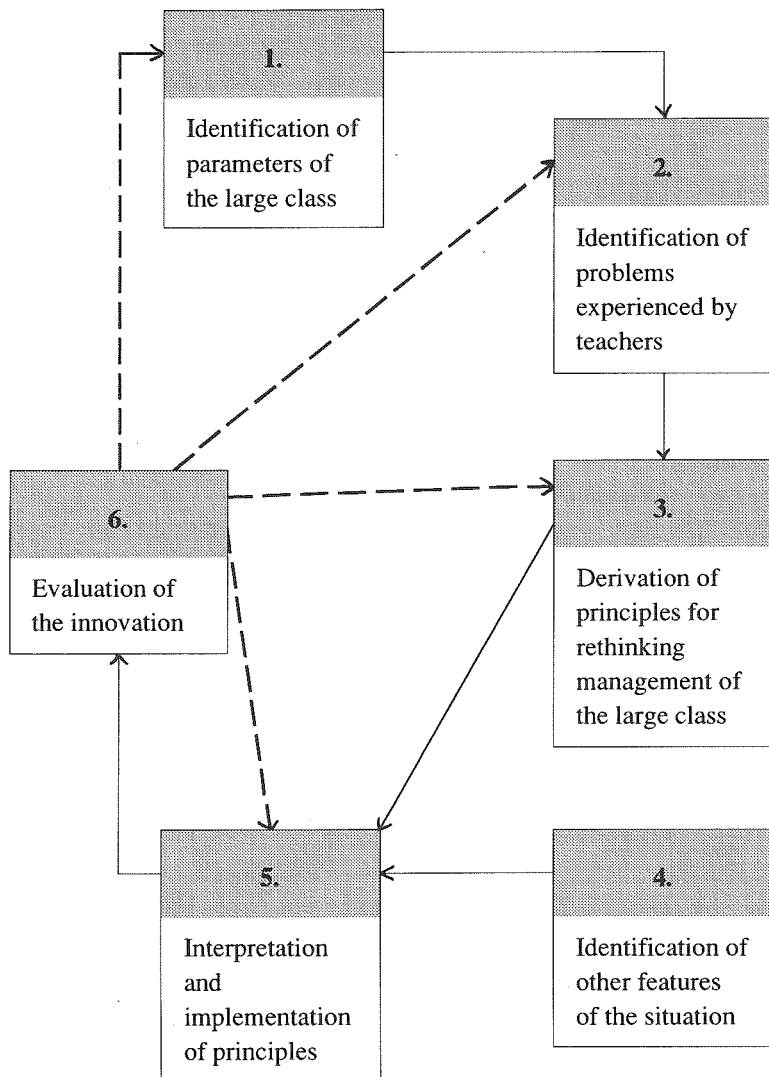


Figure 1: Process of rethinking the management of the large class



The observed lesson was taught by a member of the ELT team, a male teacher. During the observation I sat at the back of the tightly packed classroom, where I was joined by the other members of the team (the colleagues of the observed teacher). The lesson was based on the team's own textbook. The teacher read the passage aloud to his students, explaining a number of grammatical and lexical points to them on the way. The students were then asked to work alone to answer the questions. Towards the end of the lesson the teacher provided the answers to the questions so that the students could check their own work.

This is a fairly standard and unexceptional lesson. However, it was obvious that the teacher was having to work very hard indeed. During the first phase of the lesson he invested a great deal of energy into reading the text and giving explanations and ensuring that all the learners were paying attention. During the next phase, when the learners were supposed to be answering the questions by themselves, it was interesting to see that they actually wanted to discuss the task with their neighbours. This, however, was not what the teacher expected, and so he put a lot of effort into 'policing' the classroom, reminding the students constantly that they should work alone. His advice to the students included injunctions such as: 'Don't discuss, don't discuss; independently!' It also gradually became clear that the students were sometimes **guessing** the answers to the questions. This, too, was something which the teacher tried hard to discourage as he wanted them to read and **understand** every word in the passage.

A long discussion took place in the staff room after the observation. My overall impression was that the learners were very keen and that the teacher took his responsibilities very seriously. The teacher complained that his principal problem was that the class was too large, and it was not difficult to sympathise with him: he emerged from the lesson exhausted. This, therefore, constituted the first stage of the process of rethinking the management of this particular large class: we had identified the parameters of the large class in terms of the number of learners involved (65 present but potentially far more than that) and the teacher's perception of the situation (crowded, difficult, exhausting).

We now had to move to stage 2 of the process: defining the teacher's problems as precisely as possible. It was not enough to say that the class was large; we had to specify the exact nature of the difficulties which the teacher was experiencing. Our discussions led to the hypothesis that perhaps the teacher - with the best of intentions - was simply taking on too much responsibility. That is to say, he was not only acting as instigator of the learning task (which constituted the core of the

lesson), but he was also taking it upon himself to 'explain' the text upon which the learning task was based, to act as a policeman, and to prevent learners from talking to each other. And perhaps, then, it was the teacher's attempt to carry out all of these additional tasks in the large class - rather than the large class *per se* - which made things so difficult for him and which led to his exhaustion.

If this was the case, then we were in a position to move on to stage 3 of the process: the derivation of principles, based on the specification of difficulties, which would help us to rethink the management of the large class. The outcome of this stage is summarised in Table 1. The table perhaps gives the impression that the movement from identification of difficulties to derivation of principles was a neatly systematic one; in fact, of course, this stage required a great deal of discussion.

Stage 4 required us to identify other features of the teaching situation which needed to be taken into consideration and which might function as constraints upon or potentialities for the development of classroom plans based upon the newly derived principles. The ELT team identified the following features of the context:

- the teachers had limited time to prepare new teaching materials or even to track down extra reading texts and other linguistic input
- supplementary resources and materials were very hard to come by
- space in the classroom was extremely limited
- a blackboard was the only teaching aid available
- the learners were highly motivated
- the learners were not familiar with interactive learning procedures **in the classroom** (though they almost certainly discussed their studies with each other a great deal outside the classroom).

At this point in the discussion, the ELT team presented me with the challenge of teaching the same large class, making use of the principles which we had developed and bearing in mind the further constraints and potentialities of the situation. I accepted the challenge.

I borrowed a copy of the textbook and that evening designed a lesson based on the materials prepared by the ELT team. Two days later I returned to the College and taught the same class as the one which we had observed. This time there were 75 students present, plus six observers, crammed into the same small classroom, and so there was even less room for movement. (One of the observers said later that she felt that there had been '85 to 90' people present.)

<i>Difficulty</i>	<i>Principle</i>
A) Exhaustion caused by trying to 'explain' all the details of a text to a large group of people	1) Do not assume that everything needs to be explained. (Learners may know more than we give them credit for. If an individual does not know something then his/her near neighbour may know it. It may even not be necessary to have a perfect understanding of the text in order to carry out the learning task.) 2) Even if some part of the text does need to be explained to the learners, it may be less stressful for the teacher (and more useful for the learners) to explain it to an individual or a small group, as and when necessary.
B) Exhaustion caused by trying to 'police' the class	3) Do not assume that constant policing is necessary. 4) Let the students take on some of the responsibility for maintaining order in the class.
C) Exhaustion caused by constantly trying to prevent the learners from discussing the task among themselves	5) Allow the students to discuss the task together.

**Table 1: Principles for rethinking the management of a large class**

My lesson began with my handing out to the students - at random - small slips of paper on which I had written one or two sentences from one of the texts in the ELT team's textbook. Each student received one of these 'mini-texts'. Since there were so many people present and since the texts were relatively short, there were in consequence multiple copies of the complete text distributed around the room. Next, I wrote up on the blackboard six questions about the complete text. (These questions were not taken from the textbook; I had prepared them myself.) I explained to the students that the mini-text which each of them had in their hands would enable them to answer only one of the questions, at the most. In order to answer all six questions, they would need to consult the people sitting around them. In other words, I was inviting them to do what they had shown a tendency to want to do but had previously been prevented from doing. For most of the lesson the students worked freely, consulting their near neighbours in order to solve the problem, thus releasing me from being in the spotlight and allowing me to move (though with some difficulty) around the room, encouraging, advising and helping out where necessary. As I moved round, I was very soon able to see which questions were causing particular difficulty and which were insufficiently challenging for this class. The lesson came to an end with a brief plenary discussion of the answers to the questions and of the problems which had arisen.

We come now to the evaluation stage. After the lesson, the ELT team and I moved to the staff room for an analysis of what had taken place. Most - but not all - of the team members were enthusiastic about what they had observed. They could see that - even though the class was large and the room was extremely cramped - I had managed to get through the lesson without tension and without unduly exhausting myself. Moreover the learners had been very active and had been given an opportunity to exploit their inclination to cooperate with each other. And the students had managed to complete the task - more or less - without my having to 'explain' the whole text to them in advance. This had been achieved without the learners needing to move around the classroom, although they did of course talk to the people next to them, in front of them and behind them.

The ELT team made two criticisms of the lesson. Inevitably, there had been some noise, and so neighbouring classes may have been disturbed to some extent. Also, the team members felt that it would be difficult for them to find the time required for the preparation of the mini-texts on slips of paper. (I should also acknowledge that a one-off lesson taught by a foreigner is in any case a very unusual event. Nevertheless, it had validity **within the context** of the

discussions between the College lecturers and myself and our joint investigation of the large class problems which they were experiencing.) So, it seems reasonable to conclude that the findings from our analysis of the nature of the teacher's difficulties in his large class were accurate; that our formulation of principles based on this analysis was useful; and that our specification of other significant features of the teaching/learning situation was appropriate. The **interpretation** of these features in the design of the lesson, however, still required some modification.

### Discussion

The reason for describing this case from India in such detail is not, it must be emphasised, because this lesson demonstrates some universal panacea for large classes. Nor is there any claim that our analysis of the difficulties experienced by this particular teacher in his large class has applicability in other large class contexts. In fact, exactly the opposite is true, for what this case study does is to highlight the uniqueness of each large class. Moreover, it illustrates the **process** by which teachers can **derive** an appropriate methodology from a detailed analysis both of the difficulties which large classes pose for them and of the broader situation in which they are teaching.

This process is incompatible with the autonomous assumption that a methodology can be imported and applied in any teaching context. (On the distinction between 'autonomous' and 'ideological' - that is to say, between universalist and context-sensitive - approaches to the English language teaching classroom, see Coleman 1995.) The process which has been proposed here is also incompatible with the *ad hoc*, unprincipled and essentially anecdotal 'teaching tips' approach which still, unfortunately, characterises much discussion of large classes.

The investigative approach which is proposed here demands that we begin with a detailed examination of the classroom context and of the potentialities which the learners bring with them to the classroom. The richer our knowledge of the situation - both within the classroom and more broadly - the better equipped we will be to carry out a thorough analysis of large class problems and so make proposals for their solution.

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