

Teaching Large Classes in China – English as a Foreign Language (Notes, April 2011)

Ever since the late 1970s when China opened up to the outside world, there has emerged a boom of learning English as foreign language in the whole country. The number of English learners in China has increased at an overwhelming speed with China's entry into the WTO along with the rapid development of globalization and communication among all countries in the world. Thereafter, due to the lack of quality teachers and resources, the size of language class at any educational level tends to be larger and larger. It is very common for Chinese teachers either at primary or secondary schools to teach a class with more than 50 students and even not rare to have a college class with over 100 students especially since the expansion of college enrollment in 1999. Teachers face many challenges teaching in large classes which can not be easily avoided in Chinese context, so much research has been conducted in such environment in order to facilitate teachers to cope with the problems arisen by the increase of the students in the classroom.

I. Definition of Large Class

How large a class can be considered as large one? It is a relative answer. Hayes (1997) says there is no quantitative definition of what constitutes a large class, as people's perception of this varies from context to context. In some private language schools a class with 20 students may be perceived large, in Lancaster University project an average number of the large class is around 50 (Coleman 1989), while in China, large class generally refers to that of holding 50-100 students or more, which to some foreign teachers may be super large. It can be seen that in different context or culture, people have different degrees of tolerance of class size. As Ur (1996) concludes, what is relevant to the class considered as large one is how the teacher perceives the class size in the specific situation, regardless of the exact number of the students in it. Therefore large class is one with more students than the teacher prefers to manage and available resources can support, from this point of view, large classes usually are considered to pose insurmountable problems for teachers.

II. Problems and Advantages of Teaching in Large Class.

There is no consensus when it comes to the effects of class size on students' learning

achievements, but many language teachers hold a negative view on teaching English in large classes. Often can we hear them to say such words as “out of control”, “hard to organize class activities” or “impossible to communicate”. Similar worries are also shared by many researchers. Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) feel that it is difficult to control what happens when the number of group passes a certain number. Hayes (1997) thinks the ideal size of language class is 30 at most, because only under such a scale can offer enough chances for the students to communicate with each other. According to many teachers’ views and complaints, Hayes classifies the problems associated with teaching in large classes into five categories: 1) Discomfort caused by the physical constraints; 2) Control problems (discipline aspects); 3) Lack of individual attentions; 4) Difficulty on evaluation; 5) Problems of charging learning effectiveness. These problems can be physical, psychological but to a great extent technical. Harmer (2000) also finds out in his study that large classes bring difficulties to both teachers and students and process of teaching and learning. It is difficult for teachers to contact with the students sitting at the back and for students to get the individual attention, and it is even impossible to organize dynamic and creative teaching and learning sessions. Most importantly, large classes are especially daunting for inexperienced teachers. This also indicates that teachers need more technical strategies in large class. Synthesizing the earlier views, Locastro (2001) summarizes the problems of teaching large classes as pedagogical, management-related and affective. While large classes are not definitely a pedagogical disaster, the difficulties arisen from large classes raise more requirements to language teachers compared with those teaching smaller classes.

From the late 20th century, the issues of handling large English classes also aroused the interest of teachers and researchers in China especially in higher education. ([Chen Dongmei & Tian Jianguo 2002](#), [Liang Ying 2009](#), [Shao Ying 2010](#), [Xiong, Hui 2006](#), [Yang Xingsheng 2008](#), [Yuan Mingxi 2003](#), [Zhu Zhenhua 1995](#)) Some researchers express concerns over the challenges encountered by the language teachers. For example, Zhang Jiamin (2002) analyzes the large classes in two colleges and identifies the problems as follows: 1) Discipline problems; 2) Effective learning; 3) Weariness, which confirms to those mentioned by some foreign researchers. Yu Jianqiong (2004) identifies some similar problems of large classes, e.g.

students' individual differences are ignored and the classroom environment is worrying. She also mentions that limited chance for students to practice English hinders the improvement of their oral English, which is particularly true in foreign language context like China, since speaking English in class might be the only chance for students to practice oral English. These problems of college large classes are also reflected in those of primary and secondary schools. (Su Tongquan 2005, Tan Long 2009, Zhang Lian 2010).

To summarize at this point, , for teaching large classes, it is difficult for teachers 1) to 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; 5) to give timely and effective feedback and evaluation.

But like some foreign researchers such as Ur (2000) and Hess (2001), who argue that large classes can provide richer human resources and greater opportunities for creativity than smaller class, some Chinese researchers also identify some advantages of teaching large classes. Xu Zhichang (2001) notices that more students mean more ideas, and therefore, provide more opinions and possibilities. Qi Li and Wang Jiana (2009) complement three more advantages in detail by saying that large classes can provide more opportunities for co-students' interaction, foster an atmosphere of cooperation and encourage creativity and innovation. Therefore large classes bring not only challenges but also opportunities for teachers, as noted by Lewis and Woodward (1988), it is the teaching methodology rather than class size that contributes best to the efficacy of teaching. Such views encourage teachers to take adaptive teaching strategies to cope with the problems arisen from the environment.

III. Principles and Strategies of Teaching in Large Class

Many studies on teaching large classes in China explore 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 communication and cooperation; 2) how to apply multimedia instruction

efficiently; 3) how to enhance creative teaching; 4) how to organize learner-centered 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, so developing an instructional strategy, like proper use of multimedia, can solve these problems. The experiment of the use of multimedia instruction finally proves to be successful and encouraging.

Since the problems that teachers often encounter while teaching large classes are either affective or management-related or pedagogical, the ways of increasing teaching efficiency in large classes are explored accordingly in teaching English Listening (Zhi Ning and Sun Hongye 2006), English Speaking (Chen Yong 2009), English Reading (Ye Ying 2005), English Writing (Shi Leimin 2009), Vocabulary (Nan Chao 2005) and some courses for English major students (Chang Junyun and Ni Chunyan 2003). Many useful suggestions have been proposed and tried by Chinese researchers and teachers, among which teaching in accordance with students' level, cooperative learning and multimedia instruction are most frequently discussed. Some of the teaching principles and strategies are summarized in the following table.

| Teaching Principles and Strategies in Large Class | |
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| Affective | <p>1) knowing the students well (Shao Ying 2010) eg: collecting personal information by use of students' portfolio; asking students by their names to answer questions in class;</p> <p>2) establishing good rapport with students (Huang Qiang 2006, Xiao Li 2005) eg: communicating with students frequently; giving feedback in time; creating relaxed and unthreatening environment;</p> <p>3) showing concern for both strong and weaker students (Pu Xiaoyan 2008) eg: providing equal chances by giving different tasks or assignments according to the students' levels;</p> <p>4) arousing the students' interests (Hui Caixia and Jiang Lan 2008, Xie Hui 2007, Xu Aijun 2007) eg: enhancing expressive capability by talking humorously or exaggerating facial expression; using different teaching means like pictures, music, movies etc; carrying out various teaching activities such as games, role plays, and contests etc;</p> |

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| <p>Management-related</p> | <p>1) keeping the class disciplined (Zhang Min 2008)</p> <p>e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● lowering the voice if the class is too noisy; ● moving around during class; ● establishing class standard practice; <p>2) grouping students in multiple ways (He Lin 2007, Huang Yuehua 2008, Zhong Yulian 2008)</p> <p>e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● grouping students by interesting names; ● grouping students with mixed abilities; <p>3) Marking homework assignment in different ways (Yang Xingsheng 2008)</p> <p>e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● encouraging students to mark their assignments by themselves; ● encouraging students to mark their assignments in groups; ● choosing to mark students assignments randomly by teacher; ● returning assignments by giving group feedback; |
| <p>Pedagogical</p> | <p>1) establishing student-centered teaching philosophy (Yao Yanju and Yang Ruizhi 2006, Wang Xiaojun and Yu Haixia 2003)</p> <p>E.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● providing more chances for students to participate through individual work, pair work, group work and whole class work (Zhong Yulian 2008); ● promoting learner autonomy by creating autonomous learning atmosphere and training students' learning strategies (Lv Fang and Wang Lan 2003, Tan Qin and Qiu Jing 2008, Yin Jing, Xu Ming and Yang Haili 2003); <p>2) changing traditional teaching mode (Chen Jun, Zeng Xiangfa and Wang Jie 2006, Yan Zhijuan 2006)</p> <p>eg:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● setting up different teaching objectives or assigning different homework for different levels of students (Meng Mei and Liu Qinliang 2007); ● applying the communicative and task-based language teaching to increase students' use of language (Su Juan 2007, Wen Jian 2003, Yang Jianping 2002); ● organizing cooperative learning activities such as think-pair-share, three-step interview, and jigsaw to develop students' comprehensive language competence and cooperative skills (Wang Xiaoyan, Wang |

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| | <p>Qiuling and Zeng Weiwei 2007, Zhao Yanning 2008);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● developing activity-based (especially group activity) language teaching (He Lin 2007, Huang Yuehua 2008) <p>3) making use of modern teaching means (many research can be referred to such as Ma Gang and Hu Anqi 2007, Wang Li 2009, Wang Zhongxiang 2006)</p> <p>eg: using multimedia instruction; using internet technique;</p> <p>4) applying multi-evaluation system (Gao Yan 2009, Wang Peng and Jiang Dayu 2009)</p> <p>eg:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● differentiating evaluation; ● using both summative evaluation and formative evaluation; ● combining teacher evaluation, peer evaluation and self-evaluation; |
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IV. Conclusion.

It can be seen that a large class is a relative concept. Problems and difficulties of teaching associated with large classes can also be found in smaller classes. Teachers need to view large classes from a different perspective and recognize that despite a lot of disadvantages they can also provide many opportunities for teaching and learning. Class size is not the determining factor of teaching efficiency. Teachers need to enhance their innovative awareness and capabilities for developing effective ways for dealing with large classes based on the characteristics of large classes.

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