Why Investigate Large Classes?

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Abstract
This paper presents an overview of the literature on large classes in English language teaching. It presents findings concerning the size of large classes, the importance of class size, the problems of large classes and solutions to these problems. The article also provides an introduction to the other papers in this issue by discussing the context of the research reported and the issues that prompted the interest in conducting research into large classes.

Large classes are the reality for most English language teachers. Throughout the world, and especially in developing countries, teachers are faced with classes larger than the size they believe facilitates effective teaching and learning. And in many situations, class size is growing. Pressure from increased student numbers and the need for educational institutions to be profitable has led to a doubling of class size in many schools and universities over the last few years, and the peak may not have been reached yet. For many teachers, large class size is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, challenge facing them in their work. Yet, the literature has all but ignored the issue of large classes. Aside from one research project in the nineteen eighties and occasional scattered articles, teaching large classes has not received the attention it deserves. Focusing in depth on one situation, a university in Thailand, the articles in this special issue of *rEFLections* attempt to redress the balance by finding out what teachers think about large classes, by examining what actually happens in large classes, and by investigating the effects of some efforts to ameliorate the problems of large classes.

How large is a large class?

How many students need to be in a class before it can be considered large? Is a group of 30 students a large class? How about 60 students? There are no easy answers to these questions, since perceptions of class size are subjective and also depend on a number of variables. A few patterns and key variables, however, emerge from the previous research into this area.

Firstly, teachers rely on the largest size of class that they regularly teach when making judgments concerning what makes a large class (Coleman, 1989c). In other words, if a teacher is used to teaching classes of 20 students, he or she will often say that 30 students is a large class; but for another teacher whose regular class size is 40, a large class might comprise 60 students. Despite these differences, teachers nearly always end up teaching classes larger than what they consider is ideal.

Secondly, what is being taught influences teachers' judgments of the size of large classes. At many universities for subjects other than English (and unfortunately all too often for English as well), classes for lectures may consist of several hundred students. Where the teaching involves the transfer of factual knowledge, such class sizes may not be problematic (Obanya et al., n. d.), but for the teaching of English, which requires the learning of complex skills, these massive lecture classes are likely

to cause a wide variety of problems. Similarly, within English language teaching, most teachers would view the minimum size of what would be considered a large class for teaching speaking to be smaller than for teaching reading (LoCastro, 1989). The content being taught, then, must also be considered when making judgments of the size of large classes.

There are many other variables which can also influence perceptions of the size of large classes. These include the age of the students, the level of their studies, their motivation, and the size of the room in which lessons are taught.

All of these variables make it impossible to definitively state how large a class must be to be considered large. Nevertheless, there is a surprising amount of agreement on the issue in the literature. Table 1 shows the numbers of students mentioned in articles about large classes for English language teaching. A quick glance shows that all the authors agree that large classes have at least 40 to 60 students. Although other teachers may have very different ideas, these figures give us an image to grasp on to when considering previous work on large classes.

Table 1 Some minimum sizes of large classes

Author	**Minimum size of large class**
Barker (1976)	55
Chimombo (1986)	50
Dixon (1986)	40
Finocchiaro (1989)	65
George (1991)	60
Hayes (1997)	50
Holliday (1996)	50
Hubbard et al. (1983)	45
Li (1998)	50
Long (1977)	60
Nolasco & Arthur (1986)	40
Safnil (1991)	60
Samuda & Bruton (1981)	40
Touba (1999)	60

Is class size important?

Since most teachers teach class sizes larger than they consider ideal, we might conclude that most teachers think that large class sizes have adverse effects on learning. There is, however, a lack of research evidence showing that large classes are prejudicial to learning (Allwright, 1989a, 1989b).

Part of the reason for this lack of research evidence is the difficulties in actually showing that large classes adversely affect learning. In conducting research into the effects of class size, there are simply too many additional influential variables that could affect results. For example, we might try to compare the learning of some students when they are grouped together in a large class compared to when they are split into smaller classes, but the language points they will be learning will necessarily be different in the two situations. Alternatively, we could compare the learning of two

different sized groups of students with the same teacher, but how can we control for the differences between the students?

In fact, within the research into large classes, at least two factors have been identified as more important than class size: the quality of teaching (Obanya et al., n. d.) and the kinds of activities used (Kumar, 1992). It would therefore seem that teachers perhaps should not be too worried about class size.

However, even if large classes are not directly prejudicial to learning, they throw up a whole host of problems and challenges for teachers that smaller classes do not. These problems are still a matter of concern.

The problems of large classes

The vast majority of the literature into large classes falls into two kinds. Firstly, many books and articles simply list potential problems with large classes; and secondly, there is a wide range of suggestions, especially teaching techniques, for how to deal with these problems. The problems of large classes typically mentioned in the literature are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 The problems of large classes

Problem	**Reference**
Learning	
• Less effective learning	Coleman (1989d); Ur (1996)
Management/Activities	
• Discipline	Coleman (1989d); Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); Hayes (1997); Li (1998); LoCastro (1989); Nolasco & Arthur (1986); Peachey (1989); Sabandar (1989); Ur (1996); Woodward (2001)
• Absentee students	George (1991)
• Organising activities	Harmer (1998); LoCastro (1989)
• Reliance on lectures and drills	Coleman (1989e); Hubbard et al. (1983)
• Avoidance of some activities	McLeod (1989); Peachey (1989)
Physical/Practical	
• Space	Coleman (1989d); Nolasco & Arthur (1986); Peachey (1989); Woodward (2001)
• Discomfort	Hayes (1997)
• Students can't see/hear	Long (1977)
• Noise	LoCastro (1989); Nolasco & Arthur (1986); Woodward (2001)
• Timing	Peachey (1989); Sabandar (1989)
• Time for student presentations	Watson Todd (1999)
• Provision of materials	Coleman (1989d); Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); Nolasco & Arthur (1986); Peachey (1989)

Affective factors	
• Achieving rapport	Harmer (1998); Holliday (1996); Hubbard et al. (1983); LoCastro (1989); McLeod (1989)
• Impersonalisation	Carbone (1996d)
• No sense of community	Hubbard et al. (1983)
• Teacher discomfort	Coleman (1989d)
• Intimidating atmosphere	Harmer (1998)
• Learning names	Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); Hubbard et al. (1983); LoCastro (1989)
Interaction	
• Few opportunities to speak	Coleman (1989d); Hubbard et al. (1983); Ur (1996)
• Giving attention to individuals	Coleman (1989d); Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); Hayes (1997); Peachey (1989); Ur (1996); Watson Todd (1999)
• Focus on the action zone	Shamim (1996)
• Increased use of the mother tongue	Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); Woodward (2001)
• Less interesting lessons	Ur (1996)
Feedback and evaluation	
• Monitoring	LoCastro (1989); Peachey (1989)
• Giving feedback	Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); George (1991); LoCastro (1989)
• Assessment	Coleman (1989d); Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); Hayes (1997); Sabandar (1989)
• Marking load	LoCastro (1989); McLeod (1989); Peachey (1989); Ur (1996) Watson Todd (1999)
Miscellaneous	
• More mixed abilities	Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998)
• Getting feedback from students	Hayes (1997)

To some extent, the problems listed in Table 2 confirm the premise that large classes are not prejudicial to learning. While ten authors highlight the problems of discipline in large classes, only two claim that large classes lead to less effective learning. It could be argued that any detrimental effects of large classes on learning are not directly the result of class size; rather, they may be due to knock-on effects of the other problems. For example, if receiving corrective feedback is a crucial factor in learning (Han, 2002), then the difficulties of giving useful feedback in large classes could be one real cause of any adverse effects on learning of large classes.

Even if we place little emphasis on the direct learning effects of large classes, the problems listed in Table 2 are daunting. The sheer number of potential problems as well as the variety of problem types would challenge even the most experienced and competent teachers. It is therefore not surprising that large class sizes are a matter of so much concern for teachers.

Perhaps because the problems of large classes are so worrying, it is easy to overlook the fact that there may also be benefits accruing to large class size (Coleman, 1989c). These might include the facts that students can be safely anonymous in a large class, that students can make more friends, and that, from an administrative perspective, teaching is more efficient in large classes. It seems clear, however, that these potential benefits of large classes are vastly outweighed by the problems. We therefore need to look at the suggestions in the literature for solving the problems.

Solving the problems of large classes

Perhaps the majority of the literature on large classes concerns suggestions for how to solve the problems. A selection of these, matched with the problems they attempt to solve, is given in Table 3.

Table 3 Suggested solutions to the problems of large classes

Problem	Solution	Reference
Management/Activities		
• Discipline	Use routines	Finocchiaro (1989); Nolasco & Arthur (1988); Sarwar (1991); Woodward (2001)
	Use student leaders	Harmer (1998)
• Organising activities	How to run drills	Barker (1976)
	How to run role-plays	Byrne (1988); Haozhang (1997)
	How to use minimal pairs	Dobbyn (1976)
	How to use story-telling	Carbone (1996a)
	How to give lectures	Carbone (1996b); Coleman (1989e); Dion (1996); Felder (1997); McKinney (n. d. b); Obanya et al. (n. d.)
	How to run groupwork	Heath (1982); Hubbard et al. (1983); Nolasco & Arthur (1986); Samuda & Bruton (1981)
Physical/Practical		
• Space	Organise seating	Finocchiaro (1989)
Affective factors		
• Intimidating atmosphere	Play background music	Haozhang (1997)
• Learning names	Various techniques (e.g. name cards)	Carbone (1996d); Duppenthaler (1991); Nolasco & Arthur (1988); Nunan & Lamb (1996); Obanya et al. (n. d.); Sarwar (1991)

Interaction • Few opportunities to speak	Eliciting choral responses Use pairwork and groupwork	Finocchiaro (1989); Harmer (1998); Long (1977) Coleman (1989e); Dion (1996); Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); Harmer (1998); Long (1977); McKinney (n. d. b); Obanya et al. (n. d.); Safnil (1991); Touba (1999); Woodward (2001)
Feedback and evaluation • Monitoring • Giving feedback • Assessment • Marking load	Use peer monitoring Student-student consultations Give feedback in plenary Use self-assessment Use peer assessment Use portfolios Limited editing Use computer marking Use student leaders	Duppenthaler (1991) Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); Ur (1996) Chimombo (1986) Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998); Hargan (1994); Obanya et al. (n. d.) Dixon (1986); McKinney (n. d. a) Dixon (1986); Watson Todd (1999) McKinney (n. d. a) University of British Columbia (1992) Finocchiaro (1989); Harmer (1998)
Unspecified or global problems	Use project work Use e-mail, discussion boards and the Internet Team teaching Use assistant teachers Share resources between institutions	Obanya et al. (n. d.) Carbone (1996c); Desmet (1997); Gillespie (n. d.); McKinney (n. d. a); Plane (1996) Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) Safnil (1991) Obanya et al. (n. d.)

Despite the wealth of suggested solutions, a large number of the potential problems given in Table 2 remain unaddressed. The majority of the suggestions focus on problems of management, running activities and evaluation with the other types of problems largely unsolved. This may be because some problems, such as physical and practical problems, are intractable, but the paucity of suggestions specific to large classes for affective and interactional problems is worrying.

A second worrying aspect of the literature on solutions to the problems of large classes is that the suggestions are almost entirely presented simply as teaching tips. While the suggested solutions may be very useful for teachers faced with large classes, there is an almost complete lack of research into their effectiveness. They therefore remain tentative suggestions rather than being proven techniques. The lack of evaluation of these teaching tips is symptomatic of an overall dearth of research into large classes.

What to investigate in large classes

The main previous research into large classes is the *Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project* conducted in the nineteen eighties which produced twelve project reports. In setting up the goals of the research project, Coleman (1989b) posed a series of questions to guide research into large classes:

- What are teachers' concerns?
- How large is 'large' (from both teacher and student perspectives)?
- How widespread are large classes?
- Why do large classes exist?
- What are students' concerns?
- How can data be collected in large classes?
- What actually happens in large classes?
- How do teachers modify their behaviour in large classes?
- How do learners cope with large classes?
- What learning takes place in large classes?
- Do students learn the same things in large and small classes?
- Do they learn in the same ways?
- How can the problems of large classes be solved?

Unfortunately, the majority of these useful questions remained unanswered in the project. Most of the project reports concerned questionnaire surveys of teachers' beliefs on large classes, which, while useful, were firstly limited, and secondly criticised in terms of the questionnaire design, subject selection and data analysis (Oladejo, 1992). Overall then, the project was somewhat disappointing.

Since the *Lancaster-Leeds Project*, serious research into large classes for English language teaching has been minimal. Indeed, only three research reports stand out. Kumar (1992) examined the effects of class size on interaction; Holliday (1996) compared the contrasting approaches of native speaker and Egyptian teachers in large university classes; and Hayes (1997) reported data from a project to help teachers in rural primary schools in Thailand cope with large classes.

The upshot of this lack of research is that, of Coleman's questions listed above, only the first two have been satisfactorily answered. While this collection of articles does not attempt to provide answers to all the other questions, we do hope that it may give at least partial answers to some.

The thirteen questions above fall into three main categories. The first five questions concern either basic data about large classes or participants' beliefs about teaching and learning in large classes. Such information can be gathered through surveys, of which the second article in this collection is an instance. The next seven questions all involve analysing what actually happens in large classes and require descriptive investigations of classroom teaching. The third article examining the discourse of large and small classes provides some evidence for these concerns. The final question also focuses on what happens in the classroom, but, instead of being descriptive, evaluations of attempted solutions require interventions in the teaching/learning process. The final two articles in this issue examine two attempted solutions.

All of the papers in this collection concern large classes, but they also form a coherent collection in another way. The papers all examine the situation of large classes at universities in Thailand, and especially King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) where all of the authors work. Although such a specific focus means that the generalisability of the findings reported is unclear, it does allow the findings of the different chapters to be compared producing a richer picture of large classes in one situation than a collection of papers from many different situations would produce. To gain the greatest benefits from a collection of papers concerning the same situation, we need to know more about the situation.

Thai universities and KMUTT

Thailand is a country of approximately 60 million people which has undergone very rapid economic development in the last quarter century. In common with other countries in a similar position, educational development has lagged behind. Much of the education system still follows very traditional patterns with rote learning the norm in many English classrooms, and what teachers consider large classes are common at all levels of education (Watson Todd, 2003; Wiriyachitra, 2002). Most classes within the public education system have at least 30 students with perhaps the majority having 50-60 in a class. While such class sizes have been the norm in secondary schools for some time, a rapid expansion in the provision of tertiary education has meant that there has been a particularly noticeable recent growth in class size at Thai universities.

There are 24 public universities and around 50 private universities in Thailand. For nearly all degree programmes the medium of education is Thai and students studying majors other than English are required to take English for three semesters. Most English courses involve 60 contact hours over 15 weeks, but there is a lot of variation between universities in teaching techniques and course objectives.

KMUTT is a public university which has recently gained autonomy in its decision making. Although there are no English major students at the university, there is a well-respected and active School of Liberal Arts which provides English language support courses for students from other faculties. A few years ago, the faculty implemented a new task-based curriculum for all language courses which now consist of a series of large-scale tasks, each taking several weeks to complete (see Watson Todd, 2001 for details). In the same period of time, there has been increasing pressure on class size. In 1999, average class size was 34, but by 2001, this had increased to an average of 40. This growth in class size has meant that some teachers are facing classes considerably larger than those they taught just two years before. At present, the faculty is managing to keep the pressures on class sizes under control, but there are serious threats that, in the near future, class sizes may start spiralling upwards. These facts, we believe, make KMUTT an ideal situation for conducting research into large classes.

Research into large classes as teacher development

Faced with such increases in class size and with the threat of further increases in the future, the staff at the School of Liberal Arts were deeply concerned about potential adverse impacts on teaching quality as well as detrimental effects on their professional lives. Rather than simply sit quietly and try to make the best of a bad situation, the staff decided to initiate a series of research studies into large classes, of which this collection is the outcome. There was, in fact, an implicit goal behind

conducting the research. Because of our concerns with the potential adverse consequences of teaching English in large classes, we hoped that our results would be able to persuade administrators at the university of the folly of continuing to increase class sizes for English. In this way, we wished our research to have wider social effects, and thus, although on the face of it the research consists of a survey and a discourse analysis among other research methodologies, all of the papers could also be considered action research.

Action research originated in the area of social psychology, where the key purpose of action research is to have a social effect on practice in the situation in which the research is conducted (Day, 1999). In other words, action research is research aiming to lead to change. Such change can involve several possible focuses, including changing theory, changing institutions and changing teachers (Edge, 2001). In hoping to influence the university concerning class sizes, this collection is aiming for institutional change. In addition, there is a second kind of change that is crucial to this research project, and that is to change the researchers.

One crucial feature of action research is the need for the researcher to engage in reflection as part of the research process. This feature means that action research is a key means of promoting teacher development (Burns, 1999; Wallace, 1998). Indeed, some action research may be conducted with teacher-researcher development as the prime goal of the research (Woods, 1996). While perhaps not the prime goal of this research project, teacher-researcher development was nevertheless given a heavy emphasis.

The teachers who conducted the research and are the authors of the articles in this collection are experienced, well-qualified and competent teachers. However, despite their academic backgrounds, they perhaps needed to do more research than they had previously conducted. One purpose of this research project into large classes, therefore, is to help the faculty staff to become more capable of doing quality research. It was hoped that having many teachers involved in different studies as part of one project would provide a motivation for the teachers to actually complete the process of conducting and writing up their research (a common reason for the lack of published research for many of the teachers). In addition, a system of research mentoring (see Maneekhao & Watson Todd, 2001) was set up to provide any support that the teachers felt they needed.

This collection provides concrete evidence of the success of the project in stimulating the teachers to conduct and publish research. Whether it also achieves the implicit goal of persuading the university to cap class sizes for English at a reasonable level remains to be seen. Many of the results in the papers were not what we expected. At this point, we would like to invite you to read the papers to consider what the challenges of teaching large classes are and whether classes of, say, 40 to 50 students really do have adverse effects on the teaching and learning process in English language classrooms.

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