

Teachers' Beliefs Concerning Large-Class English Teaching at the University Level

Pattamawan Jimakorn and Wareesiri Singhasiri
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' beliefs toward teaching English in large classes. The study made use of a questionnaire to survey 75 tertiary-level lecturers in Thailand. All participants had more than one year's teaching experience. The questionnaire comprised 3 parts with closed-ended and open-ended questions and rating scales. It was used to find out the teachers' beliefs concerning classroom management, teaching techniques and strategies, teaching procedures, evaluation and assessment, physical constraints, and affective relationships. The results show that tertiary-level teachers think that teaching English in large classes may be possible but many constraints should be taken into consideration.

Large classes

Parents and educators almost universally identify small classes as a desirable attribute of successful school systems and class size reduction initiatives have been implemented widely (Averett & McLennan, 2006). However, we know that schools, institutes and universities cannot always follow the idea mentioned above. In Thailand, at present, every university has been compelled to cope with an increase in student number and reductions in funding from the government. For example, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi is one of the universities that is facing this situation. In the past few years, the number of students has increased 30% every year; nevertheless, the number of the teachers, particularly English teachers has increased only slightly. Due to the huge increases in students but the small number of teachers, the faculty has to hire more part-time teachers, and each year this causes accountability pressure in terms of payment for extra teachers and university facilities. As a result, the university initiated a policy to promote 'large classes' as it is believed to be a solution of the problems of increasing student numbers.

However, it is unclear whether the idea of using large classes can be implemented in teaching and learning English. There are several studies on this topic, particularly the Lancaster-Leeds Project (1989) which views 'large classes' as a challenging idea. There were about 13 reports from several countries such as Nigeria, Japan, Indonesia, South Africa which presented interesting findings on large classes. Another interesting project, the Teaching Large Classes AUTC Project (2001), was conducted by The University of Queensland, Australia. It reports on the large class teaching around Australia from several disciplines with suggestions on management, teaching techniques, materials, the use of technology and assessment.

Teaching in large classes has been promoted in several countries; often as a top-down policy from the executive administrators of the educational institution. The institutes may be concerned with the lack of teachers or the vast increase in the number of students. If the decision-making were passed down the hierarchy so that teachers could choose, would they be willing to teach in large classes?

Importance of teachers' beliefs

What do teachers think about large classes? It is important to listen to teacher's beliefs, but what are teacher's beliefs? Kagan (1992, p. 65 cited in Farrell, 1999, p. 2) defines "teachers' beliefs as 'tacit', often consciously held assumptions about students, classroom, and the academic materials to be taught". She also mentions that teachers' beliefs are stable and do not change which may be because they are 'personal constructs' as mentioned by Hampton (1994, cited in Richards et al., 2006). Beliefs may be formed since teachers are very young. The roots of teachers' beliefs may derive from observation of their school teachers, classroom experiences, interaction with colleagues and with their own students and so on. Pajares (1992 cited in Albion, 1999) found that there was a "strong relationship between teachers' educational beliefs and their planning, instructional decisions, and classroom practices". Thus, teacher's beliefs can affect the teaching methodology, materials and activities they choose for the classroom.

Johnson (1994, cited in Farrell, 1999, p. 2) proposes that teachers' beliefs share three assumptions. Firstly, they influence teacher's perceptions and judgments. Secondly, they play a role in how teachers interpret and implement teaching knowledge in classroom practice. Thirdly, understanding teachers' beliefs is important as it may improve teaching practices and teacher education. This point is supported by Richards et al. (2001, p. 42), who state that "the study of teachers' beliefs forms part of the process of understanding how teachers conceptualise their work. In order to understand how teachers approach their work it is necessary to understand the beliefs and principles they operate from."

Thus, before any schools or universities make decisions to implement the policy of teaching large classes, it is worthwhile to listen to what the teachers believe concerning this approach.

Previous research into teacher beliefs concerning large classes

Extensive research has been conducted on teaching large classes but not much has studied teachers' beliefs in this approach. However, there are a few studies under the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project which are worth discussing.

The first study was conducted by McLeod (1989). He collected data by questionnaire from 113 teachers in tertiary education from Japan, Nigeria and other African countries. The questions concerned problems teachers might encounter from teaching in large classes i.e. problems of individual learners, physical constraints, quality of marking and control, learning and teaching, and classroom interaction. The results reveal that 43.3% of the subjects thought they might have problems of effective teaching which concerns the process of teaching and learning. 33% of them revealed that it required effort to teach in large classes. Affective factor was another facet that the 23.7% of the subjects were concerned with.

Another study under the same project was undertaken by Coleman (1989). Similarly to McLeod, he found that English teachers in Nigeria who taught in classes of 100-200 students encountered a wide range of difficulties in teaching. These concerned relationships with students, control of the class and assessment. The subjects reported

positively that with the class size at an ideal level they could work more comfortably and easily. This indicates that teachers preferred to teach in a small class with an ideal size as they did not need to struggle and face the difficult circumstances of teaching in large classes.

Peachey (1989) also studied teachers' perceptions of ideal class size and the problems they might find when teaching in large classes. The study was undertaken in South Africa. Similarly to McLeod and Coleman, teachers found teaching in large classes problematic.

To summarise, it can be seen that teachers believe that teaching in large classes is considerably difficult for them in several aspects.

Purposes of study

This study aims to investigate teachers' beliefs in terms of perceptions, opinions and attitudes towards teaching English in large classes. The results obtained may provide the interesting ideas and useful information for any Thai universities which intend to implement this approach.

The Study

This section provides information on subjects, research instrument and data analysis.

Subjects

The subjects were 75 lecturers from major state universities in Thailand namely, Chiangmai University, Chulalongkorn University, Khon Kaen University, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology North Bangkok, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Suranaree University and Ramkumhang University. They were all instructors of English language. They were made up of 17 males and 58 females. Their teaching experience ranged from one year to more than fifteen years, 18 participants with 1-5 years, 9 with 6-10 years, 6 with 11-15 years and 42 with 15 or more years. The majority, 59 participants held master's degrees, 9 held doctorates and 7 bachelor's degrees. Their maximum class size which they used to teach was 5,000 (some subjects taught in the open university) and the minimum was 5. The average class size was around 30-40.

Research Instrument

In order to access the opinions and perceptions of the teachers, it was decided to use a questionnaire. The questionnaire was piloted with the teaching staff of the Department of Language, School of Liberal Arts, KMUTT. The questionnaire was then amended. Around 100 copies of the revised questionnaire were distributed to English departments in the universities above. Seventy-five completed questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire was developed from the previous research of Coleman (1989) McLeod (1989), Peachey (1989) and Locastro (1989). It is composed of three parts with open-ended questions, closed-ended questions and rating scales. Part I, closed-ended questions, asks for the participant's personal details, gender, teaching experience, education and where they currently worked. Part II, closed-ended questions, concerns the participant's knowledge of their university's policy on class size.

Facts and Opinions on Large Classes was in Part III from where we drew most of the results. It is also divided into four sections as follows. The first section was closed-ended questions. The second and the third were rating scales and the last was closed-ended questions. These four sections concerned:

1. general and physical conditions of their current classrooms
2. teaching and learning conditions in large classes
3. degrees of difficulty of teaching in large classes
4. opinions towards teaching in large classes and ideal classes

Data Analysis

Participants' responses were analysed descriptively by calculating percentages and average scores, in order to determine what trends in the data suggested about the teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards learning and teaching in large classes.

Results and Discussion

Facts and opinions concerning large classes

Results obtained from Part II show clearly that the majority of teachers were not aware of any policy in their institutions on teaching large classes (Question 1: 70.67%). The remaining 22% reported that their universities have the policy of class size from 50 as the minimum and 1,000 as the maximum. The number reported varied greatly depending on the university policy and types of universities.

The majority of the participants (62.5%) found teaching in large classes possible with different conditions and teaching approaches. However, they also mentioned that the larger the class is, the less effective. In addition, the larger the class is, the more extra work for teachers. The teacher participants thought that when the classroom is large, teaching and learning inevitably becomes more difficult, thus less effective. The reasons provided were grouped as presented below.

- *Not appropriate for teaching productive skills*

According to the participants, large classes were found to be more appropriate with a teacher-centred mode of teaching, reading-based contexts and grammar-translation methods as opposed to communicative approaches. To illustrate, they considered that a large class makes it substantially more challenging for students to develop language skills, especially productive skills.

- *Non-contributors*

When it comes to group work, there are always students that are 'hidden labour' and do not wish to participate with the rest.

- *Technological aids*

The participants thought that in a large class, teaching aids are a must in order to assist both learning and teaching. Visual and audio aids can vary from an overhead projector, a video, microphones to closed-circuit televisions.

- *Teaching management*

The class may be divided into smaller groups and tutorial sessions may need to be provided, which, however, will add to other teaching responsibilities (see Darasawang and Srimavin, this issue, for a discussion of this approach). Some participants

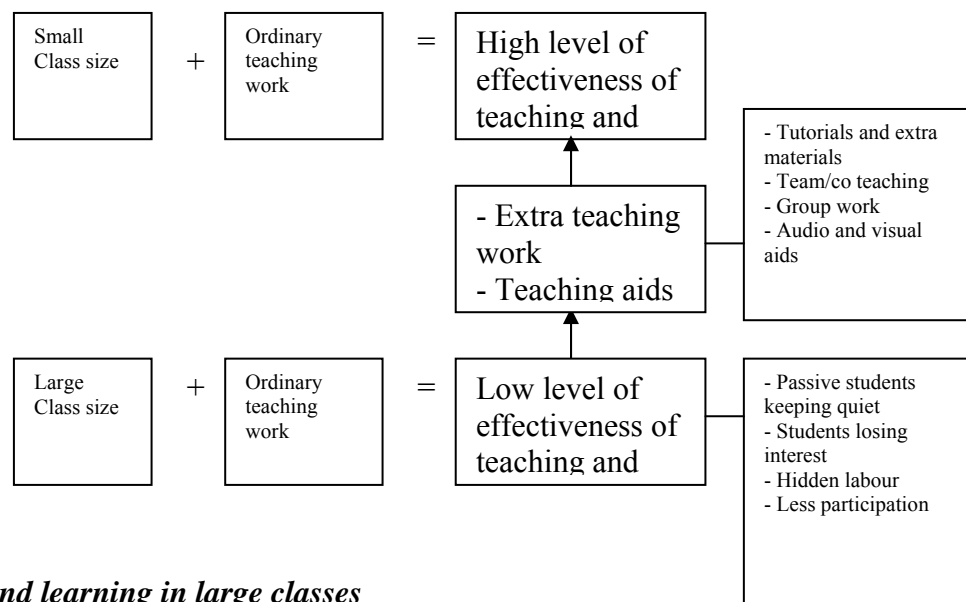
suggested co-teaching and team teaching as well as co-operative learning, for example, group work. A combination of these approaches can give a large class the same quality of teaching and learning that a normal-sized classroom has.

- *Not enough attention and feedback*

The teachers believe that students do not receive the same level of attention in a large class; there is a little chance to interact with the teacher and it takes a great deal of time to give feedback to students equally. In addition, many students are often found left behind in a large class. A teacher would not be able to notice if a student or two lose interest and keep quiet throughout the lesson because the classroom is too crowded.

The reasons reported by the teachers can be summarised them as in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The comparison of teaching small class and large class



Teaching and learning in large classes

This section reports on the responses of the teachers towards teaching and learning in large classes. The data was re-categorised into two groups, institution’s advantages and items relating to teaching and learning. The questions used a 5-point rating scale where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

According to Table 1, the teachers thought that the institution benefits more from having large classes than other agents (teachers and students), particularly in terms of the budget spent for facilities. The teachers did not agree that, with teaching in large classes, their teaching or working load would be less than usual as can be seen from item 1.

Table 1 The teachers' opinions towards teaching and learning in large classes

| | Mean |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Responses to institution's advantages: | |
| 1. Teachers save time and energy when teaching in large classes as they do not need to repeat the same lessons many times. | 2.70 |
| 2. The university saves the budget as it does not need to pay for facilities like electricity bills or extra teachers. | 3.55 |
| 3. The university does not need many teachers. | 2.93 |
| Responses to teaching and learning: | |
| 4. Teaching in large classes is suitable for teaching productive skills – speaking and writing. | 1.46 |
| 5. Teaching in large classes is suitable for teaching receptive skills – reading and listening. | 2.72 |
| 6. Students still have chance to practice or work in group if they have to learn in a large class. | 3.07 |
| 7. Teaching in large classes promotes lecture-based approach rather than interactive approach. | 4.15 |
| 8. Assessment will focus on tests and examination rather than homework or continuous assessment e.g. tasks, assignments, group projects. | 3.77 |

Most teachers saw teaching in large classes as promoting a lecture-based approach, where receptive skills are the main focus. On the other hand, large classes were likely to be less beneficial for productive skills. In addition, the teachers agreed that the possible methods for assessment in large classes were tests and examination. Homework and continuous assessment might not be appropriate choices as teachers have to work harder on checking and marking.

Difficulties of teaching in large classes

This section reports on the responses of the teachers to how difficult they thought the teaching responsibilities in a large class. The questions used a 5 point rating scale where 5 = very difficult and 1 = very easy. The results are shown in Table 2.

From Table 2, basically, the participants thought that teaching in a large class tended to be difficult as the mean score of every item is more than 3. The five items with the highest mean scores concern monitoring, teacher/student relationships, learning development and the physical environment. The least difficult items concern using teaching aids, setting up goals, preparing handouts, reviewing lessons, and timing lessons.

Table 2 Responses to degrees of difficulty of teaching in large classes

| What a teacher has to do | Mean |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| I. Physical environment | |
| 1. Being able to see the whole class | 4.43 |
| 2. Using the right level of voice | 3.67 |
| 3. Using audio-visual aids | 3.13 |
| II. Teaching preparation | |
| 4. Setting up goals for the lesson | 3.16 |
| 5. Determining models and strategies of teaching | 3.82 |
| 6. Selecting instructional techniques of teaching | 3.83 |
| 7. Preparing handouts and other materials | 3.25 |
| III. Teaching management | |
| 8. Timing the lesson | 3.41 |
| 9. Having students work in group in class | 3.73 |
| 10. Giving equal share of class activities | 4.39 |
| 11. Providing appropriate pace of lessons | 3.89 |
| 12. Managing discipline | 3.97 |
| IV. Teaching procedures | |
| 13. Previewing lessons | 3.44 |
| 14. Reviewing lessons | 3.40 |
| 15. Giving and checking homework and assignments | 4.40 |
| V. Monitoring | |
| 16. Being able to give support and advice to individual students at the same time | 4.68 |
| 17. Monitoring work and giving feedback | 4.45 |
| VI. Assessment | |
| 18. Determining methods of evaluating student outcomes | 3.83 |
| 19. Marking exams | 3.89 |
| VII. Learning development | |
| 20. Developing receptive skills, i.e. listening and reading | 3.66 |
| 21. Developing productive skills, i.e. writing and speaking | 4.43 |
| VIII. Teacher/student relationship | |
| 22. Creating a good relationship between the teacher and students | 4.11 |
| 23. Knowing students individually | 4.51 |

Conclusion

In conclusion, Thai teachers thought that teaching in large classes was difficult in several aspects such as the relationships of teachers and students, monitoring and giving feedback and assessment. However, teachers also suggested ways to deal with large classes. For example, teaching management should be well-planned and well-organised. Moreover, teaching in large classes may be suitable for teaching receptive skills such as reading and listening even though it is inappropriate for productive skills like speaking or writing which require more attention and interaction from teachers. If the school or universities cannot avoid teaching in large classes, they need to provide sessions where students can practice in small groups and consult with their teachers. With references to the results of this study, it is quite essential for the executive administrators to understand teachers' attitudes and their beliefs as well as the nature of language learning and teaching. Also, teachers themselves may need to be trained in how to teach and manage in large classes.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Research Topic: Teachers' Beliefs Concerning Large-Class English Teaching at the University Level

Part I: Personal Details

1. Gender : 1. male 2. female
2. Teaching experience:
 1.Up to 1 yr. 2. 1-5 years 3. 6-10 years
 4. 11-15 years 5. More than 15 years
3. Education:
 1. Bachelor's Degree
 2. Master's Degree
 3. Doctoral Degree
4. University: _____

Part II: University Policy

1. Do you know whether your institution have an official policy on large classes?

Yes No

2. What is that policy regarding MAXIMUM class size? (Please give number) _____
3. What is that policy regarding MINIMUM class size? (Please give number) _____
4. If there is a policy, who (inside the institution or outside it) determined this policy?

Part III: Facts and Opinions on Large Classes

1. What is your usual class size? _____
2. What is your ideal class size? _____
3. What is the largest number of students you have had in a class? _____
4. At what number do you consider a class large? _____
5. At what number do the problems of uncomfortably large class begin? _____
6. In a large class, do you normally teach alone or do you co-teach? _____
7. Do you think it is possible to teach English in large classes?

Yes No

And why? Please give reasons for the answer above:

8. Read the statements about teaching and learning in a large class and then put a tick (3) in the box according to the rating scales below.

Strong agree = 5
 Agree = 4
 Uncertain = 3
 Disagree = 2
 strong disagree = 1

| No. | Statement | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Teachers save time and energy when teaching in a large class as they do not need to repeat the same lessons many times. | | | | | |
| 2. | The university saves the budget as it does not need to pay for facilities like electricity bills or extra teachers. | | | | | |
| 3. | The university does not need many teachers. | | | | | |
| 4. | Teaching in large classes is suitable for teaching productive skills – speaking and writing. | | | | | |
| 5. | Teaching in large class is suitable for teaching receptive skills – reading and listening. | | | | | |
| 6. | Students still have chance to practise or work in groups if they have to learn in a large class. | | | | | |
| 7. | Teaching in large classes promotes lecture-based approach rather than interactive approach. | | | | | |
| 8. | Assessment will focus on tests and examination rather than homework or continuous assessment e.g. tasks, assignments, group projects. | | | | | |

9. How do you find these categories if you have to teach in large classes? Please give a rating for each item according to the criteria below.

- Very difficult = 5
- Difficult = 4
- Neither difficult or easy = 3
- Easy = 2
- Very easy = 1

| No. | What a teacher has to do | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Timing the lessons | | | | | |
| 2. | Setting up goals of the lesson | | | | | |
| 3. | Determining models and strategies of teaching | | | | | |
| 4. | Selecting instructional techniques of teaching | | | | | |
| 5. | Previewing lessons | | | | | |
| 6. | Reviewing lessons | | | | | |
| 7. | Preparing handouts and other materials. | | | | | |
| 8. | Determining methods of evaluating student outcome | | | | | |
| 9. | Being able to see the whole class | | | | | |
| 10. | Using the right level of voice | | | | | |
| 11. | Having students work in groups in class | | | | | |
| 12. | Being able to give support and advice to individual students at the same time | | | | | |
| 13. | Giving equal share of class activities | | | | | |
| 14. | Providing appropriate pace of lessons | | | | | |
| 15. | Giving and checking homework or assignments | | | | | |
| 16. | Marking exams | | | | | |
| 17. | Creating a good relationship between the teacher and the students. | | | | | |
| 18. | Knowing the students individually | | | | | |
| 19. | Developing productive skills, i.e. writing and reading | | | | | |
| 20. | Developing productive skills, i.e. writing and speaking | | | | | |
| 21. | Monitoring work and giving feedback | | | | | |
| 22. | Managing discipline | | | | | |
| 23. | Using audio-visual aids | | | | | |

10. Please answer these questions.

10.1 Do you think teaching in large classes is difficult for you?

- Yes. Please give more opinions in 8.2 and 8.3
- No.

10.2 Large class make it difficult for me to do what I would like to do because:

10.3 With an ideal number of students in my class, I could:

Pattamawan Jimakorn is a lecturer in the School of Liberal Arts at KMUTT. She is currently on a Royal Thai Scholarship studying for a PhD at the School of Education, University of Nottingham.

Wareesiri Singhasiri is Assistant Professor at KMUTT and holds a PhD from the University of Essex.