

The use of students' name cards in large classes

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Abstract

In teaching classes of 80-120 learners, teachers may be worried about controlling and managing classrooms, communicating with students, and attracting their motivation and interest. One idea to address these problems is for students to wear cards during classes; such cards contain information including students' names. This article reports on a questionnaire survey that investigates students' attitudes towards the use of name cards to examine whether they can facilitate classroom management. The subjects were in four large classes: Classes A and B, with name cards, and Classes C and D, without name cards. In the two former classes, based on the information on their cards, the students had to sit in the same place throughout the semester. The findings show that, at the end of the semester, the students with name cards, to some extent, felt that the use of such cards had made them more alert in class and had facilitated classroom activities, including the formation of groups; moreover, they reported that the cards had helped them make new friends.

Background

Due to the increasing number of students each year, many institutes including King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), Thailand, face increasing class sizes. The increased class sizes are likely to affect classroom management. According to the policy of the university, however, teaching quality needs to be maintained despite the increased class sizes. Hitherto in language classes, there have normally been 35-40 students; however, to serve universities' needs and with the limited resources, larger classes are becoming the reality; for instance, at KMUTT, English-language teaching is moving towards class sizes of 80-120 students.

It is generally assumed that "learning occurs in proportion to class size: the smaller the class, the more students learn" (Tripod, n.d.: 1). Research shows that "small classes provide more opportunities for feedback and discussion than large classes, as well as greater student satisfaction" (ibid.: 1). However, it does not suggest that there is any correlation between student learning and class size; rather, "the key to effective instruction and student learning, regardless of class size, is engaging students in active learning" (ibid.).

Although it is worth trying to teach large classes, it is known that they cause some problems. These include the neglect of students' needs as individuals, the loss of class discipline, time-consumption and the lack of students' motivation and interest (Nolasco & Arthur, 1988). Since large class teaching is unavoidable, techniques for delivering good quality education in such settings need to be devised. To reduce the above

problems, students' name cards are implemented. Therefore, the research question of this study is 'What are the students' perceptions towards the use of name cards?'

Literature review

To Nolasco & Arthur (1988: 10), it is always very important for a teacher with a large class to find a way in which to get to know, or at least be able easily to identify, the students, and the first step in this process is learning names. Observation has shown that "a teacher's inaccurate use of students' names has a direct correlation with inattention and discipline problems." Nolasco & Arthur (ibid.) state that "knowing students' names allows a teacher to nominate them with confidence as well as to identify troublemakers."

A possible way to personalize the class and to learn students' names is to use name cards.

"This serves to enable the teacher to respond to the students as individuals and to personalize the class to a much greater degree than one would normally be able to do with a standard roll book." (Duppenthaler, 1991: 65)

Therefore, it could be said that using name cards is "the initial step in showing students that teachers care about them as individuals" (Hayes, 1997: 106).

Conant (2004: 1) puts forward the idea that using name cards not only allows teachers to learn many more of the students' names, but also, when students know that teachers know who they are, "they are often more motivated to be well-prepared." Name learning also indicates that a teacher cares about what students are doing and this helps to contribute to a positive learning environment (Nolasco & Arthur, 1988). In other words, name cards "keep student motivation high and place, to a greater or lesser degree, some of the responsibility for the class where it belongs – with them" (Duppenthaler, 1991: 65). This increases enthusiasm and participation.

Moreover, to Nolasco & Arthur (1988), if teachers make a seating plan where students sit in the same places, they can constantly refer to students during the lesson. Hayes (1997) also states that grouping and simple activities can be arranged from seating plans with name cards. "There should be little movement or noise" (Heath, 1982: 20). It seems that using name cards can help reduce time and facilitate classroom management.

Some of the issues in the use of name cards mentioned above were used as items in the questionnaire developed for this study (see Appendix). It is hoped that some of the problems of large class management will be solvable by using students' name cards.

Methodology

This section aims to give an overview of the research methodology: subjects, implementation of name cards, instruments and data analysis.

Subjects

The study was conducted with 295 first-year undergraduate students who enrolled in LNG 101, Fundamental English I, in the academic year 2004. The subjects were four classes of mixed-ability students. There were 79, 79, 69, and 68 students in, respectively,

Classes A, B, C, and D. The former two classes used name cards (details are given below) whereas the latter two did not. The teachers of Classes C and D, for instance, called students' names when checking attendance.

Implementation of name cards

The information on the name cards was card number, students' code, first and last names; moreover, there were four colors of card: pink, blue, yellow and green. In the class, the students were arranged according to the number and color of their cards. Starting with pink, student numbers 1-10 sat in order in the first row and numbers 11-20 in the second row. Then it was blue with student numbers 1-10 in the third row and numbers 11-20 in the fourth row. Yellow and green were arranged similarly. The students had to sit in the same positions as given by their color and number throughout the course.

It was the students who kept the cards. They had to stick their own card on their chest whenever they came into the class. The teacher checked students' attendance regarding their position. If a certain seat was empty, it was obvious to the teacher. The teacher also handled classroom activities using name cards.

Instruments

A questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester (see Appendix). It consisted of two parts. Part I was a rating-scale and was administered to collect the students' attitudes towards issues related to the use of name cards. Each item consisted of a four-point rating-scale: 4 = Strongly agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Neither agree nor disagree and 1 = Disagree. Part II was open-ended and called for additional comments; it was used only with the two classes using name cards (Classes A and B).

Data analysis

Each part of the questionnaire was analyzed. Part I contained questions on how students felt towards different issues connected with using name cards. The data was calculated as arithmetic means (\bar{X}) and interpreted as follows:

Criteria for rating-scale interpretation

Mean (\bar{X})	Interpretation
1.00-1.75	Disagree
1.76-2.50	Neither agree nor disagree
2.51-3.25	Agree
3.26-4.00	Strongly agree

Part II of the questionnaire was open-ended. The subjects could answer with any suggestions or comments. The responses obtained were collected and grouped into main themes relevant to the research question. The number of students who had the same ideas was also counted.

Findings

It was the purpose of this study to find out students' attitudes towards the use of name cards and whether their use facilitates classroom management. The data from the questionnaire were used to yield that finding.

Rating-scale questions

The rating-scale part of the questionnaire aimed to collect students' attitudes on issues related to the use of name cards. The data obtained were calculated for arithmetic means, and the findings are presented in Table 1. While we might have expected the means for Classes A and B to be higher than they are, the data obtained from the rating-scale questions can be divided into three major areas. The first concerns the helpfulness of name cards. From the differences in mean scores in Table 1, it can be said that name cards may help to increase the alertness of students, especially for answering questions (item 5). The other helpful aspect of name cards is that they help students form groups easily when doing activities in the class (item 6). The students will group themselves according to the color and number of their cards. Therefore, they spend a short time forming groups.

Table 1: Comparison of mean scores between classes with and without name cards

Attitudes towards issues related to the use of name cards	Classes A and B with name cards (\bar{X})	Classes C and D without name cards (\bar{X})	The differences of mean scores of two types of classes
1. The teacher knows my name.	2.83	2.87	-0.04
2. The teacher spends a few minutes checking students' names.	3.10	3.10	0.00
3. My friends know my name.	2.99	3.13	-0.14
4. I learn to work with new friends.	2.98	2.95	0.03
5. I am always alert when learning, especially when the teacher asks me questions.	3.03	2.75	0.28
6. It is easy to form groups.	3.08	2.95	0.13

The second area is the points where the use of name cards does not seem to have much effect. From Table 1, the data show that seeing students' names does not mean the teacher is able to remember their names (item 1), makes no difference in the amount of time the teacher spends in checking students' names (item 2), and does not facilitate students to work with new friends (item 4). Finally, the data from Table 1 suggest that using name cards does not help students get to know their friends' names even though they can see their friends' names by the cards on their chests (item 3). This finding is in direct contrast to our expectations. Comparison of Classes A & B and C & D is in the discussion section below.

Open-ended questions

The open-ended part of the questionnaire was completed by Classes A and B only and aimed to gather students' comments towards the use of name cards. Relevant ideas were grouped together and the number of students who gave those comments was counted. The data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Students’ attitudes towards the use of name cards

Students’ comments concerning name cards	Number of students
1. reduce time for checking attendance	40
2. facilitate classroom activities	32
3. help students get to know each other	24
4. increase students’ participation	8
5. help the teacher know students	7
6. help the teacher remember students	6
7. increase students’ sense of responsibility	6
8. motivate students to learn	3
9. create sense of self-discipline	2

From the students’ open-ended comments, we can see that the students identify three strong points concerning the use of name cards: reducing time for the teacher in checking students’ attendance (mentioned by 40 students), forming groups easily when doing activities in class (32 students), and knowing each other well (24 students).

Discussion

Regarding the purposes of the study, the expectations concerning the use of name cards are the facilitation of the six following problematic areas: knowing students’ names, reducing time for checking attendance, increasing students’ motivation and participation, managing classroom activities, getting students to know each other, and getting students to work together. From the findings in Table 1, there are only two areas in which name cards may help while, from Table 2, there are three.

Concerning Table 1, name cards help increase students’ motivation and participation and also facilitate classroom management. In Table 2, they help reduce time for checking attendance, facilitate classroom management and increase the acquaintance among students. The main way in which name cards may help teachers, therefore, is in classroom management.

The findings in Table 1 also show that students do not know their friends’ names despite using name cards. This may be because students could be familiar with their friends’ nicknames. Remembering their friends’ full first names and last names might make them feel uneasy. Therefore, if students’ nicknames are added in the cards, students might know their friends’ names more.

When the two sets of data are compared, there are two contrasts highlighted. Following the use of name cards, Table 1 shows no difference in the amount of time for checking attendance between Classes A & B and Classes C & D. Students also argue that name cards do not help them know their friends’ names. In contrast, these two points are the highlights of Table 2. These differences between the findings in the two tables need explanation.

If two or more research instruments are involved in data collection or comparison, the methodology is known as triangulation: “demonstrating the same findings through different sources” (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989: 105). The standard use of triangulation is

the support a particular instrument provides to others to place validity and reliability on the findings. In this research, however, this is not the case. Triangulation is for a different use: the comparison of different findings (Watson Todd, 2003). “Focusing on the differences between multiple perspectives could shed light on the validity of the analysis” (ibid: 167). What do the conflicting findings show?

Are the findings from the open-ended part likely to differ from those of the rating-scale questions? It seems unlikely. One possible reason for the difference observed in this study is that the statements in the rating-scale questions suggested answers for students in the open-ended part. Aspects that are most important for both class types (A & B and C & D) are still identified in the open-ended part. Regarding students’ attitudes, the use of name cards really helps reduce time for checking attendance. The majority of students said cards were very convenient and saved time for teachers to check attendance. When the data of Table 1 is compared across the two class types, although there is no difference of mean scores in checking attendance between two types of classes, the actual means are quite high (3.10). For Classes A and B, students agree that the use of name cards helps reduce the time consumption of checking attendance; for Classes C and D, it may be that the students were chatting while attendance was checked and so were unaware of the time taken for that trivial activity.

Conclusion

This study has given some perspectives from students in large classes on the use of name cards. It has provided evidence that, among other things, they believe name cards have a tendency to facilitate class management in such matters as group formation while at the same time making them, as students, more alert during classes. Introducing students’ name cards is something that is very easy to implement. For teachers who are worried about managing increasingly large classes, name cards may be a solution to some associated problems, especially regarding class management.

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