

Facing the Challenge of Teaching EFL to a Large Class with Limited Resources

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Abstract

Teaching English in many schools and universities in Libya sometimes encounters many challenges such as lack of resources, overcrowded classes and the poor conditions of such institutes. Most university classes have large numbers of students with different learning abilities and backgrounds, and the teacher often has limited to no access to teaching aids, resources and photocopying machines. Sometimes it's difficult to get enough textbooks for all the students and worst of all, under some circumstances there might not be electricity at all on some days, which makes teaching subjects like listening extremely daunting. Many teachers will be tempted to give up, but there are always some ways in which the teacher can continue teaching and make the lesson as successful as possible. Sometimes he/she will have to switch to a different plan and improvise, yet keep the lesson successful and the students disciplined and motivated.

This paper aims at presenting some tips and techniques that an English instructor or teacher can use to create a good lesson under such difficult circumstances. These tips and activities are designed for EFL students and have worked well with my listening and speaking and writing classes over the years in which I have taught these subjects at

the University of Tripoli. There is no best way to teach effectively, but each teacher has his/her own methods and techniques according to the contents of the lesson, the level of the students and the class size. Therefore, the techniques and activities presented in this paper can be edited or altered to match students' needs and the course requirements.

Introduction

The notion of a large class differs from one country to another. In some schools of hundreds of developed countries around the world, classes can have between fifty to a hundred students and even more. Most classes in most of the Libyan universities and colleges, for instance, carry large numbers of students that can simply exceed one hundred per class. In some faculties these numbers are made sure to be limited to only 30 to 40 students, such is the case in the faculty of education at the University of Tripoli. Even though, 30 or 40 students are still considered to be a large number according to many teachers and scholars, UR (1996:18) for instance stated that "the average perception of a large class is about 50 students". Baker and Westrup (2000:31) on the other hand, stated that "a large class can be any number of students, unless the teacher feels there are too many of them to make progress".

Teachers are not only faced with these large numbers, but in some cases they also have to tackle shortage of resources and limited material. Quite often, teachers find themselves in classes, where there

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are only white boards and markers to give lessons. Sometimes the students have no books and there are not any computers, CD players, or data shows available, and it might be difficult to have access to any copying facilities and what is worse, under some circumstances there might not be electricity at all. As difficult as it may seem this is unfortunately the everyday reality for many teachers around the world, and Libya is no exception. Therefore, teachers need to be fully prepared and have the necessary knowledge and expertise to save the situation and create a successful lesson. Not only the lesson itself and its efficiency is the issue, but also managing the behavior of the class, as well as keeping the students motivated and engaged becomes a real challenge, especially in skill subjects like listening, speaking or writing.

This paper aims at showcasing and discussing some tips and techniques as well as some activities that an English teacher can adopt in order to save the lesson if suddenly faced by the previously mentioned difficulties. These tips and activities are applicable to language students at different levels, as well as university students taking courses such as listening and speaking or writing.

Many teachers and scholars have been interested in the topic and have had different arguments regarding class size and the challenges that come with it for both teachers and students alike. Hayes for instances (1997) stated that there is no quantitative definition of what constitutes a large class, as people's perception of it varies from one

context to another. It can be seen that in different contexts, countries or cultures, people have different degrees of perception to a large class. Similarly UR (1996) concludes that what makes a large class is the teacher's perception of the class size in a specific situation, regardless of the exact number of the students in it. Therefore, a large class is one with more students than the teacher prefers to manage and more than what the available resources can support. Large classes in such a view are often considered problematic and challenging for teachers.

Hayes (1997) thinks that the ideal size of language class is 30 students at the most, because only under such a scale a teacher can offer enough chances for the students to communicate with each other. Harmer (2000) also finds out in his study that large classes bring difficulties to both teachers and students, as well as the process of teaching and learning. He says that when the class is full of students, it becomes difficult for teachers to contact with the ones sitting at the back and for students to get the individual attention they need. In addition, it is even impossible to organize dynamic and creative teaching and learning lessons. Most importantly, large classes are especially daunting for inexperienced teachers, because they need to have what it takes to master technical strategies in order to stay in control of the large class. Locastro (2001) summarizes the problems of teaching large classes as pedagogical, management-related and affective. Yu Jianqiong (2004) mentioned that in a large class students' individual differences are ignored and the classroom environment

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becomes worrying. She also affirmed that limited chances for students to practice English hinder the improvement of their oral and written English, since speaking and writing English in class might be the only chance for some students to practice their language.

Class size has many effects on students' engagement, behavior, and student retention as well. Finn (2003) examined the link between students' engagement and class size and conceptualized students' engagement in two forms: social engagement and academic engagement. Social engagement refers to how a student interacts socially with other students and with his teachers. Academic engagement refers to a student's attitude towards learning the language. Finn concludes that when students are placed in smaller classes they become more engaged, both academically and socially. He argues that with strong social and academic engagement; academic achievement increases.

Not only class size plays an important role in the teachers' and the students' performances, but also the availability of the appropriate materials and resources. There is a conclusive evidence that having an appropriate level of basic school resources can greatly improve students' achievement. (Hanushek, 1995:10) and Michaelowa (2001:19) for instance, found that "the availability of books appears to be the most important factor [in high-achieving, student learning]." Furthermore, having appropriate classroom equipment such as computers, data shows, a whiteboard, markers, and a teacher desk and

chair can improve both, the teacher's performance and the student's perception. Yet, one of the biggest problems faced by large classrooms in developing countries, is the lack of quality and sufficient quantity of learning resources, such as desks, textbooks, handouts and other teaching and learning supplies (Hanushek, 1995:23).

Facing the challenge of a large class and lack of material

As mentioned earlier, it is a common scenario in some developed countries like Libya where the teacher prepares his lesson prior to the class and gathers his needed material to be copied and handed out for his large number of students, or prepares his listening tracks for a listening lecture and walks to the class all confident and ready, only to be faced by the electricity cut, resulting in no photocopying for the day and no chance of playing the listening tracks. In such a situation, the teacher has to have enough expertise to move to plan B and create something different instantly to carry on with the lesson. As disappointing as it might seem, there is always a way for a teacher to make the negative situation a positive one and gives a successful lesson. Therefore, the best thing to do in order to handle the situation and teach in such a setting is to be creative in designing activities and assignments that rely on minimum materials and little photocopying. Besides, in large classes it is much preferred to go for in-seat activities with the students mostly remaining in their seats, and at the same time the teacher has to make sure to keep the students interested and

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motivated in whatever he chooses to give to save his lesson. Otherwise many discipline problems will start to arise and managing the class will become an additional burden and a tiresome experience. If utilized properly, sometimes a large class helps create interactive activities as there is always enough number of students for interaction, as well as a rich variety of human resources. Besides, the good students can be urged to help the weaker ones, encourage them to interact and also to correct their mistakes.

Every teacher must develop the approach that works best for him/her, based on their teaching style, the characteristics of their students, the subject given, the level of students and the goals and objectives of the lessons and curriculum. However, there are always some good ideas that do work well for many teachers, and the writer of this paper, based on her university teaching experience, desires to share some of what she has experimented in her writing and Listening and Speaking classes, along with some ideas and activities that are suggested by some educators and scholars.

1- Cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning has been part of the language domain for at least two decades. The approach principally aims to enhance the quality of learning by having learners cooperate in small groups or pairs. Fitzgibbon (2001:33).

Pasigna (1997:15) stresses that the strategic grouping of students is essential to teaching in large classrooms. She suggests that when class sizes swell and new or difficult information is being taught, it is best to break the class into groups .In order to familiarize students to group work, Pasigna recommends that they are best to be assigned to small groups of 5 to 7 students on a regular basis. Within these groupings, all students should be given opportunities to lead their group and speak on their behalf, thereby ensuring that there will be a good number of students that can help the teacher lead group-based exercises. A group exercise is an effective method that can be conducted as an in-class exercise. When all other materials are suddenly unavailable, they require little material or nothing at all but the teacher's creativity of mind. After having divided the class into smaller groups, the teacher may present a debatable topic where the students can discuss the cons and the pros with their group partners. The assigned lead student records the group's findings and later he/she shares it with the rest of the class. Then the lead students of the other groups will share theirs and argue with the other groups in case of disagreement.

The teacher can also write a dilemma on the board and the students work in groups to find a way to solve it. Then, the lead student of each group presents the group's response to the rest of the class and so on.

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Another activity that works well with groups is to assign each group a task, for instance; planning an event, raising a fund, or solving a problem. The task can be designed by the teacher based on the lesson that was supposed to be given but was cancelled because of the inability to copy sheets or play a recording due to the shortage of equipment or a sudden power cut. If the listening track that was supposed to be played was to discuss the problem of unemployment for example, the teacher can improvise a task in which students try to find practical solutions to such a problem and have discussions about it. Therefore, whenever the teacher is able to give the lesson later by playing the recording and copying his handouts, the students will be already familiar with the topic of the lesson, and will have already learnt the needed vocabulary through the previous task and/or discussion.

If there is much time available, students in groups, can also work together on a longer activity such as planning an itinerary for a trip. For example, they can choose a real or imaginary place, then "students work out a prospective budget with imaginary funds, to include costs for transportation, food lodgings, and entertainment" Wilhelm (2006:40). This works well to teach them holiday and travel vocabulary and teach them how to speak and write about the topic.

These kinds of activities encourage students to work with each other and stay motivated. Furthermore, the more able learners in the group can help the weaker ones understand and do the work, this leaves the teacher with less parts of the lesson to explain. This can be

applied also in writing classes where students can, for example, be given the first line of a story and are asked to work together to write a short story.

2- Realia and student's own work.

S.Han Lau (2007:19) stated that students' work cuts down on the time a teacher spends to find and create the necessary teaching material, and the students' work can be more desirable than a commercial textbook because it better approximates what the students can actually do. Therefore, it's a good idea to ask students to prepare a topic of their choice to speak or write about, and then present it and discuss it in class.

Murphey (2007:18-20) stated that there are several advantages of using students' own work as teaching material. It allows the teacher to be aware of the students' level and weak areas and can increase motivation in class because most people are more interested in themselves than others. Besides, they find it easier to talk about what concerns them because they know the information in advance and therefore, can focus only on the correct use of the target language. Hence, it is always a good idea to ask students to write or speak about themselves, their opinions and their interests. The teacher can also ask the students to bring an item (a picture, an article, a book or a device) from home to use as a talking or writing point for the class. Such an activity can help build community in the classroom and encourage

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students' self confidence and participation. An exercise as such can certainly work in both, writing and listening and speaking because students should have already prepared the material at home and become ready to discuss them with the class in an open conversation lesson or in groups. However, the teacher can help them by writing the vocabulary needed for the discussion on the board. It also works in creative writing where students can write about a topic of their choice that they have previously prepared at home to purposefully read in the class, so that the teacher can discuss the mistakes with the whole class and write new words or ideas and corrections of the mistakes on the board for everyone to learn.

The teacher can always use *realia* when he lacks all sort of other materials, a picture from a magazine, a newspaper or a news article can be a great tool to start a discussion and get the students to talk. In a speaking lecture, if the lesson given is to teach them describing appearances or characters for instance, students can be arranged in groups and each group is given a picture of a famous person and they try to describe him/her together and then share their description with the rest of the class. It can be made more exciting by not saying who the group's character is and the other groups try through listening to the description to guess who their character is. After they find out, they may argue if they think the description is not true or not applicable to the character and give their own suggestions accordingly. Through such an activity, students will certainly learn a large number of

adjectives from their peer students in the same group, and from the discussion they will have with the other groups.

A piece of news on TV, for instance, can also be a great writing prompt. A murder crime story for example, shows how the criminal committed his crime and often tells little about the victim's life. Students in groups or pairs can be asked to imaginatively write about who the victim was, from where he/she was, what was his/her occupation, was he/she married or single and what kind of life he/she was leading before the incident. They can work together to create a character and build up a story and a series of events they think had led to the murder that was on the news. They can also write about the criminal and imagine his life and the circumstances that built up to his committing such a crime. The teacher can help by writing some new crime related vocabulary on the board, and being available for guidance and corrections.

3 – Out of class assignments.

One of the good examples of out of class activities suggested by Wambuguh (2008:38) is to ask the students to choose and summarize an article from the media (newspapers, news magazines, science magazines, journals, or the Internet) dealing with a topic covered by the course. Such an activity works as an oral or a written assignment. One member of each group in the class informs his/her classmates of the title of the article and reads aloud the typed summary, or just speaks

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about it if it was a speaking lesson. After each article has been read and carefully listened to, the class attendants including the teacher are free to pass brief comments or beneficial judgments. At the end of the session, if it is a writing class, the teacher collects all summaries for grading. This activity is always beneficial because it improves the students' confidence in their oral and written communication skills, and it also helps them to stay engaged and motivated.

Students can also be given few topics to choose from and to prepare themselves in advance in order to present them to the whole class later on. They can use their own sheets and copy their own material prior to the class if they need any, this way the teacher doesn't have to worry about photocopying. They might also bring their own laptops with speakers to play a listening track or play a video which will be a saviour when the teacher lacks access to technology or encounters an electricity cut.

4– Self correction and peer grading of homework

Self correction and peer grading is an activity that is designed to engage the students in language learning while helping the teacher with the problematic issue of reading and scoring large amounts of homework, Wilhelm (2006:26).

Many teachers of large classes are not inclined to assign homework regularly since it is nearly impossible to provide quality feedback on a timely basis. Wilhelm, however states that he always gives daily

homework assignments mainly to identify the areas where learners need more help and to enable them to actively learn from their mistakes. If these objectives are met, it is not necessary to collect, grade, and return every single piece of homework. It is more productive and learner-centered to have students talk about any questions or problems concerning their homework and to actually allow them to correct it themselves before it is marked. This encourages students to come to class prepared to ask questions. While doing their homework, they are more likely to note items that they were unsure of and thereby build up metacognitive awareness of their own problematic areas.

Another good strategy is peer grading, a procedure where students exchange and grade each other's papers. After trading and grading a homework assignment, the grader student writes his name and the correct answers on top of the paper –students can use their books and dictionaries to correct each other's mistakes – and then the grader returns it to the student who originally wrote it. After collecting the homework, the teacher has to briefly check it throughout the semester and record the score to see if it was accurate. Self correction is an effective way to push some of the grading load off the teacher's shoulder, and it offers immediate feedback to students and helps them learn from their mistakes as well as the mistakes of their classmates.

Another good way of checking the students' homework is to randomly choose a few students every lecture and make them read out their answers. However, if it is a writing homework, they read out their

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final pieces of writing and the other students are asked to listen attentively and spot any mistakes and take notes to later discuss them with the teacher and the other students. Through such an activity, everyone will certainly learn from his/her mistakes and the teacher can later write down a score for the students' homework. Thus, the teacher will definitely be able to check each student's work at least few times during the semester. It gives the teacher a chance to evaluate and grade the homework and it keeps the students from slacking and not doing their work. When the choice is random, they do not know when their turn is, and therefore they keep writing their homework and doing their assignments, expecting to be chosen every lecture. Wilhelm (2006:12) stated that returning homework to a large class can be a long and time consuming process. Therefore, it helps to make piles of their homework arranged alphabetically, and leave them placed on a desk before the lecture so that they can easily retrieve their papers. This leaves an opportunity for the students to collect their work, check their mistakes, take their seats and prepare to ask questions, if they have any.

Conclusion

A large number of students packed in a relatively small class can be a nightmare to almost any teacher, especially the unfortunate one who might encounter limited access to technology, little or no textbooks, lack of sufficient resources, or having difficulty copying

handouts and exercises. The worst case scenario is having them all together when there is so much to be done and taught. Unfortunately, such scenarios for many teachers in Libya and many other countries around the world do not occur only rarely or once in a long time, but rather on daily bases and the concerned teachers are expected to fight the battles and come out fine. As daunting as all these situations might seem for the teacher, one has to be prepared to tackle the difficulties and still teach efficiently. Qualified teachers always find a way to create good lessons under such a pressure. There is always a way that a teacher can save the lesson, teach efficiently and keep students motivated. Every teacher can use different strategies that work well for his/her students, depending on the class size, students' aptitude, their language needs as well as the course requirements. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to help teachers find some practical solutions for such situations and provide them with some useful tips and activities, most of which the writer of this paper herself has tested and implemented in her listening and speaking and writing classes, and have worked well for her and for her students. The mentioned activities to a very good extent and beyond any doubt have enabled her to teach quite successfully and enabled her students to learn effectively. The activities presented in this article are not dependant on material in the form of handouts, technology or textbooks. Instead, students are encouraged to learn and use English as they work cooperatively and depend more on themselves inside and outside of the classroom.

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