

Teaching EFL to Young Learners in Large Classes: Difficulties Faced by Indian Teachers

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Abstract: The progress of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the last few decades by various Asian countries to develop the standard of language proficiency of primary school has seen a remarkable development though the class room management became a herculean task for teachers especially large classes in a vernacular presupposed classroom. The interest and attitude towards the language is alienating. This research paper tries to provide some solutions, which will enable teachers to teach more efficiently using available resources.

Introduction: In the last few decades, the number of countries incorporating English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as part of their Primary Education compulsory curriculum has steadily increased (see: British Council, 2004). The main assumption of such policies is that teaching English to young learners—understood here as pupils of 5 to 11 years old—encourages motivation, expands intercultural experiences, enhances the use of the language in action and promotes long-term learning (see: Láng, 2009).

Cameron (2001) and Pinter (2006) argue that children who learn a foreign language benefit from interaction, especially if language use and implicit learning are involved. Thus, the more opportunities children have to speak and listen to the language, as well as to use it for specific purposes, the more effective the learning process would be, in theory. However, these opportunities may be restricted by the number of students in a classroom.

The concept of large classes may be difficult to define. Some researchers suggest a general definition such as a class in which there are more students than the teacher prefers and resources are not enough to fulfill those students' needs (see: UNESCO, 2006). Nevertheless, due to the context in which EFL is taught in places like Africa and Latin America, more factors, besides the number of students, must be considered. In the case of this research project, large classes will be understood as groups of 36 students or more in which teachers are overloaded and concerned about the lack of resources, classroom management issues and difficulties to establish effective teacher-student rapport (see: Watson-Todd, 2006; Kuchah & Smith 2011). In many countries, the EFL teaching-learning process tends to be characterized by this type of class (Smith, 2011).

Previous researchers have identified some of the most common challenges that teachers encounter in large classes (see: LoCastro, 2001). Shamim, Negash, Chuku & Demewoz (2007) state that the challenges they identify are consistent with those identified in earlier studies such as those carried out within the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project in the late eighties.

In general, then, the literature is consistent on the issues faced by large class teachers. Firstly, classroom management – particularly, problems in maintaining discipline (see: O'Sullivan, 2006) – is one of the most cited challenges. Secondly, previous researchers (see: Hess, 2001)

have determined that evaluating individual learning progress and providing necessary feedback are also difficult to accomplish. Finally, the insufficient quality and quantity of resources available for teaching a large number of students seems to be a common problem (e.g. Shamim, Negash, Chuku & Demewoz, 2007). Such resources may include teachers' attitudes and skills (e.g. adaptability and problem solving skills) and strategies to deal with particular classroom characteristics, as well as material resources.

To date, however, there has been little discussion about how large class size impacts on young students learning EFL. Previous large class research has tended to be restricted to secondary or tertiary education. In addition, most studies on large classes have been focused on African and Asian countries, rather than the Latin American context, which is the focus of my study. This article reports on a small-scale study drawing on both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the experiences – and in particular the difficulties – of a group of 30 Indian teachers of EFL in large classes of young learners.

The context This research project was developed to explore language teaching in large classes of Year 6 (around 10-year-old) learners in India. Many primary schools in India are characterised by an average of over 35 students per class (OECD, 2004). India, as with other countries in the Asia, such as China and Bangladesh (Sanchez & Obando, 2008; Pagliarini & de Assis Peterson, 2008), has developed programmes of language teaching in primary schools. Since 2004, EFL has been taught as part of the compulsory curriculum starting in Year 6. A National Syllabus for each year from primary to secondary is developed by the Indian Ministry of Education (MHRD).³ This set of overarching objectives to be covered during the year is mainly oriented to developing communication skill

² In the Indian educational system, Primary Education is called Basic Education and it starts at the age of 6. Thus, the pupils considered in this study, who are in the Indian 5th Year of Basic Education, would be in UK Year 6. ³ Schools have, however, the right to create their own syllabi.

The following is based on the interviews and responds to the salient themes which emerged. While the questionnaire suggested that assessing students individually was these teachers' greatest difficulty; not being able to fulfil students' different learning needs emerged in the interviews as the most important overall theme.

(MHRD, 2012), following the international standard of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In addition, to support English learning and teaching in the state-run and subsidised system,⁴ in 2003 the MHRD created the programme English Opens Doors.

In 2010, all Year 12 students (around 16 years old) in India were assessed in English for the first time through the SIMCE (Education Quality Measurement System) in English.⁵ This exam provided a certificate, which only 11 % of the students succeeded in gaining. Of those, only 12% had studied in state-run or subsidised schools (MHRD, 2011). Thus, even though the Indian government is clearly implementing and developing different ways to improve the language skills of primary and secondary students, there is a clear need for research into the difficulties faced by teachers in this context, but little research of this kind has been carried out to date.

4 Established after 1980, subsidised schools are privately run and are recognised for "their cooperation with the State's role in education". They are primarily funded by the State and secondarily by charges to families (Almonacid, 2004:168). 5 In 2010 the test used for SIMCE in English as TOEIC Bridge, a standardised test that measured only reading and listening skills. In 2012, the test used was KET from Cambridge ESOL Examinations.

The study The study aimed to find out what difficulties are particularly salient to a group of 30 Indian primary teachers who are teaching young learners in large classes. The study focused in particular on difficulties as they are the starting point for finding effective teaching tools and strategies for large classes. Thirty Indian Year-6 teachers of EFL in large classes participated by responding to a questionnaire. Their average number of students per class was 38 (SD = 4.3). Their teaching experience varied from 3 to 27 years or more. Seven teachers out of a total of thirty participants were interviewed, as they provided the necessary information to carry out the interview (phone number). The questionnaire was in Spanish, and was piloted. The translation was necessary so as to avoid any language barriers that the use of English could cause to Chilean teachers. The questionnaire consists of ten parts with a combination of close-ended multiple-choice questions, Likert scale type questions and open-ended questions. Teachers were asked to rate the degree of difficulty (from 1 to 5) of a set of situations they might experience in teaching young learners in large classes.

While the questionnaire was developed according to different reading sources in the field of interest, the interview was semi-structured and constructed to probe more deeply into questionnaire responses.

Findings and discussion in the literature, there are many examples of difficulties found in relation to large classes. The results from the questionnaire regarding the difficulties as perceived by this group of Indian EYL teachers in their own large classes are presented in order of greatest to least difficulty (from left to right and top to bottom) in Figure 1.

Opportunity to speak English in interviews, teachers referred to providing students with the opportunity to speak English in the lesson as one of the most difficult thing about large classes. They did not explicitly refer to the reasons for this difficulty. However, they did express their concern about the small number of hours of EFL lessons a week and the difficulty of covering the wide and demanding syllabus. The use of English to communicate orally was not tested in the SIMCE exam in English. Still, its results showed that the students with more hours of EFL lessons a week had better results (MHRD, 2011). Therefore, this difficulty could be inferred as requiring an increase in the number of hours of EFL lessons a week, as this could facilitate covering the wide syllabus of Year 6. However, this was not the most important difficulty for these Indian teachers in large classes.

Different learning styles and needs Heterogenous groups of students with various learning styles, needs and preferences for pace of learning can be understood as a common situation in any class. In a large class, however, teachers say they find it particularly difficult to identify and respond to these individual features (e.g. Nakabugo, Opolot-Okurut, Ssebbunga, Maani & Byamugisha, 2008). In my study, teachers indeed described their classes as heterogeneous groups of students with varied learning needs, which can hardly be fulfilled within this setting. Furthermore, many of the teachers interviewed pointed out that to deal with students with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and other learning needs was extremely

challenging. Similarly, some of them expressed the idea that sometimes focusing on those students restricted attention to advanced students.

Classroom management The issue of classroom management, particularly related to the control of discipline and noise, has been repeatedly mentioned in previous studies in the area of large classes. Surprisingly, the findings of my study showed a different perspective. Most of the teachers in this group expressed that they did not have any problems with maintaining discipline. These results suggest further research is needed to identify the reasons for this discrepancy. According to studies carried out in India regarding teachers' practice and identity (Avalos & Aylwin, 2007), teachers learn to deal with discipline problems as they gain more teaching

experience. In the current study, 14.8 years (SD = 10.9) was the average length of teaching experience. Consequently, the relative longevity of my participants' experience could be a plausible reason for the findings in this area.

Other relevant issues Many participants additionally referred to the lack of teaching resources, such as appropriate size of the classrooms and little access to supporting materials, as a difficulty in this context.

In sum, the three major issues for these Indian TEYL teachers appear to be the problems of "giving learners the opportunity to express themselves in English," "accounting for varied individual learning styles" and "assessing learners individually". It was therefore found that these teachers face similar challenges to those identified in the literature for older learners in other countries. The study also highlighted an interesting difference, in the area of classroom management, which could be put down to years of experience of the teachers in question.

Implications for further studies and conclusions This article reported on an exploratory small-scale research project focusing on the difficulties faced by teachers in large EYL classes in India. As this kind of study had not been carried out in a Indian EFL context before, it can be seen as a preliminary investigation, in which the findings presented could be the basis for further studies. Such studies could be implemented with a larger and more representative sample of teachers from the different geographical regions in the country. Thereby, results could be generalised to a greater degree in developing a countrywide diagnosis regarding EFL large classes. Students' perspectives and classroom observations could be included to diversify the sources of information for a better understanding of this issue.

More broadly, the problem of improving EFL skills in Indian education is far from solved. The MHRD National Curriculum needs to take into account the context in which the teaching-learning process is developed, as well as find ways to improve children's EFL skills. Measuring students' abilities should be accompanied by other steps to support this process such as disseminating understanding large classes as part of the Indian teaching-learning context, more hours of EFL lessons per week and changes to teacher education and curriculum.

The current findings contribute to a growing body of literature on large classes, EFL and young language learners. In fact, research in this area of large classes is still weakly developed (see, however, TELC n.d.). A greater focus should be placed on context – specifically, large classes -- as part of the teaching-learning reality facing many teachers, and there is a pressing need for solutions to be sought, which will enable teachers to teach more efficiently using available resources.

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