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EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF MIXED LEVEL AND LARGE CLASSES¹

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to deal with the main difficulties that teachers face when teaching mixed level large classes. One of most common encountered challenges is keeping students' attention and having a fair level of participation by all students in the class. This paper will argue some of the benefits of technology to "keep" students and their attention in class and get them engaged as well. The uses of an engagement trigger in interactive classes, such as images, videos or sounds are suggested, in addition to other strategies which will be further elaborated in this paper. The findings presented in this paper will be from class observation and surveys that have been conducted in two different settings, such as among university students and in a high school, where the challenges are even greater. Finally, there will be some conclusion and recommendations to be considered by teachers when teaching large classes².

Key words: large classes, interactive classrooms, autonomous learning, technology tools

¹ This article is extended version of the proceeding whic was presented at Interantional Communication and Art Symposium 2.

² Some of the findings presented in this paper are part of the research conducted by a pre-service teacher (MSc Mario Mezini) while completing the practicum and it is combined with the semi-structured interviews of the author with other colleagues teaching at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and personal observations while conducting lectures.

KARMA SEVİYELİ VE GENİŞ SINIFLARIN ETKİLİ YÖNETİMİ

Özet

Bu makalenin amacı, öğretmenlerin karma düzeyli büyük sınıflara ders verirken karşılaştıkları temel zorlukları ele almaktır. En sık karşılaşılan zorluklardan biri, öğrencilerin dikkatini çekmek ve sınıftaki tüm öğrencilerin adil bir düzeyde katılımını sağlamaktır. Bu makale, öğrencileri ve dikkatlerini sınıfta “tutmak” ve aynı zamanda derse dahil olmalarını sağlamak için teknolojinin faydalarından bazılarını tartışacaktır. Etkileşimli sınıflarda resimler, videolar veya sesler gibi etkileşim tetikleyicilerinin kullanımı, bu yazıda daha ayrıntılı olarak ele alınacak diğer stratejilere ek olarak önerilmektedir. Bu makalede sunulan bulgular, üniversite öğrencileri ve lise gibi zorlukların daha da büyük olduğu iki farklı ortamda yürütülen sınıf gözlemlerinden ve anketlerden alınacaktır. Son olarak, kalabalık sınıflarda ders verirken öğretmenler tarafından göz önünde bulundurulması gereken bazı sonuçlar ve öneriler olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kalabalık Sınıflar, Etkileşimli Sınıflar, Otonom Öğrenme, Teknolojik Araçlar

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

The issue of class management when it comes to large classes, which inevitably leads to mixed abilities or multilevel, has been the subject of research for a considerable time, however, the aim of this article is to draw a comparison between two different contexts where large classes include lectures taught at the tertiary level of the studies as well as secondary or elementary educational levels. There are classes ranging from 50-100 students during lectures and there are classes with 36 – 42 students, at the elementary and secondary level of the education, respectively. The peculiarities that each context bears are closely related to the teaching approaches and the problems that might arise from these large and mixed abilities classes. The scope of this paper will include both contexts with a view of identifying some of the challenges that arise when teaching in this context along with the approaches and techniques that teachers use to manage these classrooms effectively and most importantly how to draw students' attention and ensure their active participation and interaction in the classroom.

As for large classes during lectures that take place at the faculty, based on observations as well as semi-structured interviews between colleagues, it can be stated that students regard lectures as lecturer's turn to talk and present information while students are passive or distractive throughout the lecture. It is often the case that students sitting in the front rows are

the ones who participate during lectures whereas students sitting at the back rows are often there just for the sake of showing up and are often engaged in small talks with each other or distracted by their devices. It has been observed that note taking, in the majority of the cases has been replaced with the “photo capturing” of the screen displayed. As a result, lecturers are often faced with the challenge of how to keep students’ attention and to ensure a fair level of students’ participation. Yet, the most important outcome that lecturers aim to achieve in these circumstances is the knowledge retention, so that the same information will not have to be explained all over again while students are having their practical classes or seminars. The lecture rooms provide students and professors with less flexibility to move or to ensure students’ interaction by using different activities. The seats are organized in rows and the chairs and desks are fixed on the floor so that they cannot be moved. Students are left with no other choice but sitting throughout the lecture, which normally lasts two periods of 50 minutes with a 10-minute break in between.

On the other hand, large classes with 30-40 students have existed and continue to exist in Albania’s public secondary and elementary education cycles. About 27% of classrooms in Albania had over 30 students in 2015-2016, and overcrowding is of particular concern in urban centres (UNESCO, 2017[24] at (Maghnouj, 2020). Some teachers have reported class sizes of over 40 students, beyond the legal limit.

There are a series of issues that come along with large classes such as mixed abilities and multilevel groups become a challenge for the teacher to cater to the individual needs of the students. It becomes more difficult to tackle disruptive or any other behaviour, which hinders the learning process. Outside of the classroom teachers have to deal with time management issues such as the time that they need for developing teaching resources and grading. There has also been observed in this setting that teachers need to change some ineffective habits (such as raising the voice, using the mark as a punishment, calling names etc.) The issue becomes more pertinent when young teachers are involved who lack the experience and proper training of how to manage large and multi-level classes.

Yet studies and research to identify best methods and strategies for managing large and mixed abilities classes in the Albanian context are missing. Nevertheless, large and multilevel classes along with their complexities do not belong to a particular context nor are they associated with a certain subject or teacher, thus, the research available in relation to the

different approaches and techniques to reach the maximum level of participation can apply to any context, including Albania.

Some of the questions that we intend to research in this paper include the effectiveness of the use of interactive activities to increase students' engagement; promoting the use of collaborative activities regardless of limitations arising from classroom space/seating arrangement, the time and resources available; having in place rules and routines to manage disruptive behaviours and finally taking into account students' feedback, feelings and reactions in relations to the effectiveness of strategies and methods employed.

Common Issues Identified in Large and Multilevel Classes in Both Tertiary And Secondary Education Settings

The notion of large classes and the challenges that it presents are different depending on the educational setting, whether it is a secondary school or a university setting, or it may also change considering the subject that we are teaching. However, research shows that class size does not automatically correlate with students learning. What is important is not the size of the class, but the quality of the teaching (UNESCO Office Bangkok and Regional Bureau for Education in Asia and the Pacific, 2015).

Yet, research has confirmed some of the most common challenges that teachers face when teaching large classes. Hayes (1997) at (Erlina , et al., 2022) divide these challenges into five parts: (1) discomfort, (2) control, (3) individual attention, (4) evaluation and (5) learning effectiveness. Each of these challenges are related with the difficulties that both teachers and students feel during the learning process. Teachers feel discomfort due to the physical constraint that large numbers impose. They cannot organize interactive activities as there is not enough room for students to move. Further, teachers are also faced with discipline problems (Rohin, 2013, British Council, 2015) where they feel the pressure of managing a classroom when it becomes too noisy, which can be caused due to the off-task or disruptive behaviour or potential conflicts that might arise between student-student or student-teacher.

Large classes also pose the challenge of dealing with different students' levels, needs and interests. It becomes difficult for teachers to gauge students' involvement and the degree to which they are following them. It becomes even more difficult for teachers to do anything about it as it would mean boring some or losing others (Allais, 2014). In addition, teachers find it

harder to provide individual feedback and guidance and if they do the quality of feedback to students can be reduced in large classes.

On the other hand, students feel reluctant to participate in class activities due to peer judgment, which tends to become greater in large classes, therefore, teachers should make sure that they promote an environment of trust and mutual respect from the very beginning of a course (Wilsman, 2013). It is also important that activities are organized to provide students with the opportunity to engage with class questions and challenges anonymously or in small groups instead of or prior to large class discussion (Wilsman, 2013).

Considering the Albanian context, based on class observations and personal experience, it can be concluded that some of the most common characteristics of large classes in both the tertiary and secondary education include the following:

- sitting arrangements do not favour interactive activities as desks and chairs are fixed and difficult to move. The teacher has little space to move around in the classroom and students cannot move during the lesson without causing disruptive noise.
- students often have difficulty hearing the teacher due to the noise or when students are engaged in small group activities.
- establishing personal contact with students becomes more challenging as it might take longer for teachers to remember students' name or teachers cannot get to know the students well due to the lack of time
- marking assignments and tests becomes more time consuming due to the large number of students in the classroom as a result they reduce the number of tests, or they have to seek other ways of checking students' knowledge.

Presentation of Research Methods and Data

In order to confirm the above conclusions, a study was conducted in two teaching contexts where both qualitative and quantitative methods of research were employed. The combination of these methods allowed to approach the research questions from two aspects: from the lecturers' perspective at the tertiary level and from students and teachers' perspective at the secondary level.

The advantage of using both a qualitative and quantitative research method is that it provides researchers with more knowledge, and they can examine different aspects of an overall research question with a process such as the triangulation of data (O’Cathain, Murphy, & Nicholl, 2010). The use of qualitative methods allows for a more holistic approach, i.e., looking at situations through the eyes of as many participants or stakeholders as possible (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007:34) because “the world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed-upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research” Merriam (2002) as cited at (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006). In this light, it should be confirmed that the qualitative research was used to investigate some of the issues related to the management of large classes and the use of effective teaching strategies and the quantitative research method was used to collect data and statistics, which could then be used to support the arguments raised.

Thus, the qualitative methods used for this study included the semi-structured interview with the academic faculty staff and two English teachers at high school. In addition to the interviews there was also conducted class observation ‘in pursuit of the goal of knowing more’ (Moran-Ellis et al as cited at (Dupin & Borglin, 2020) under the ‘analytical framework following a thread’ (Dupin & Borglin, 2020), which ensures the analytical integration of data that comes from different types. Observation allows us to be inside a social process and the researchers will deal with different realities. Another important advantage of observation is that it is an independent tool the researcher adapts to the context and interaction and tries not to influence the course of events and to exert minimal influence on the environment (Ciesielska, Boström, & Öhlander, 2018). The data collected from the above qualitative methods were analysed by themes including – students’ attention, interaction or engagement, discipline issues or disruptive behaviour and retention of knowledge or students’ achievements

Whereas the quantitative methods were used to identify strategies and methods teachers of EFL use to manage large classes with a view of evaluating their effectiveness. There was also a need to measure how students feel about them and what is the degree of success when teachers and students collaborate. Questionnaires can be an effective means of measuring the behaviour, attitudes, preferences, opinions and, intentions of relatively large numbers of subjects more cheaply and quickly than other methods (McLeod, 2018).

For this reason, there were designed two questionnaires to collect data on the classroom management approaches of teachers and students. The teachers’ and students’ questionnaires

were designed by taking into consideration the aim of this study and the findings of literature review. The questionnaires included multiple choice questions and with a few open questions so that the participants could express their opinion as well.

The respondents of the questionnaire included both students and teachers, with about 60 students of the 11th grade at high school and 2 teachers of English language. Their English level was defined according to the books that they used, mainly, intermediate level. The age varied from 16-17 years old. There were 40 girls and 20 boys. Both teachers were English language teachers with an experience of more than 10 years.

The questionnaire prepared for both teachers had different questions such as: What is a large class? How do they solve problems when they teach in large classes? Do they have enough time to do activities in the class? Which are some methods that they use to manage large classes while teaching? etc. In total, there were 14 questions including questions about teachers' educational and experience background and their opinions regarding large classes, discipline related issues, class management and control.

Questionnaires prepared for students had different questions such as: Which are some activities that their teachers organize in the class? How do they feel when working together? And to what extent they agree or disagree with the questions raised along with some general information in relation to the class activities and methods employed by teachers.

The second question of the questionnaire 'What is a large class according to you?' was a multiple-choice question with four options presented so that teachers could select more than one option. Both teachers believed that large classes create problems regarding management, control and learning achievements, moreover they think that large classes are linked to the low-quality results and both teachers mentioned their own views, one by writing 'large classes become too noisy', and the other by writing 'large classes have negative effect on learning process'. As both teachers agreed that large classes create problem regarding management and students' results this means that managing a large class is a prominent problem that even experienced teachers face. Marking students' work, grasping and holding students' attention and their involvement in the lesson is very problematic when there are too many students in the class. The main problems that were mentioned in this respect were related to the noise level and the distraction of mobile phones. During the class observation it was noted that both teachers managed their classes to some degree. There were times when students were noisy or they were

confused of what to do but both teachers, given their experience, knew how to communicate with them.

On the other hand, compared to the teachers' opinion, students had different ideas about large classes in most cases. When asked 'What do you think, what is a large class?' the options that they had to choose from were as follows: a) I think a class that includes a large number of students; b) I think the class that creates problems regarding management, control and learning achievements; c) I think the class that has low quality results; d) I think a class where students can find the chance to share their ideas; e) I think a class that has physical environmental problems; f) Other, please specify,

Surprisingly, boys associated large classes with the number of students where 15 boys selected the first alternative (a large class includes a large number of students) and 10 boys believed that large classes bring about low-quality results. Whereas girls chose two other more common options, 25 of them believed that students could find the chance to share their views even though there is a large class. 10 of them also shared the view that large classes lead to problems in relation to management, control and learning achievements. Almost 57% of students believe that a large class includes a large number of students, has low quality results and creates problems regarding management, control and learning achievement, in contrast with 43% of students who believe that students could also find the chance to share their views in large classes.

These data revealed that classes with a large number of students pose a problem not only for teachers but for students too. It may be a problem because some students may feel neglected from the teacher, they may feel unable to express their own opinions or what they know freely because the teacher does not have enough time to pay attention to all of them and they may lose their motivation as a result.

Summary of Results and Findings

The aim of this thesis was to reveal and discuss about some methods and strategies for managing a large class. This research attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of these methods and strategies based on students' and teachers' feedback about their effectiveness. Further, it evaluated which methods and strategies are best for the teacher and for students. In this study 2 questionnaires were designed to collect data on the classroom management approaches of

teachers and students. The teachers' and students' questionnaires were designed by taking into consideration the aim of this study and the findings of literature review.

They believed that a large class is a challenge for both the teachers and students and that it creates problems regarding management, learning achievement and both teachers and the majority of students believe that large classes are associated with low quality results. As a matter of fact, in Albania classroom management is a problem that all teachers face and have to deal with, because the majority of public schools are overcrowded with students who have a different background, different interests, feelings and different levels of motivation. In this context, large classes become a challenge for all teachers and students.

On the other hand, knowing strategies and methods for managing these large numbers of students becomes essential for teachers. Nowadays, there is a large body of research and literature available that help teachers learn how to motivate and involve all students, how to be closer to them and how to take into consideration students' needs and interests when formulating objectives. Larger class participation will help teachers manage those large classes better and tackle any of the problems associated with it.

Wright, Bergom & Bartholomew, 2019 present a thorough analysis of the research available in relation to the discussion about whether large classes bring about low-quality results or not. In fact, both teachers and students, who participated in this study, held the opinion that large classes affect students' achievements. Nevertheless, there has been little research about how instructors change (or do not alter) their pedagogical practice when they move from a large- to a small-class setting (Wright, Bergom & Bartholomew, 2019).

Based on the classroom observation it was noted that both teachers of this research used some good strategies for solving problems in their classes for example, they tried to establish good relations with their students by getting familiar with them, by using students' name when asking questions, by having close contact with the students and by giving feedback in time. They also made use of some useful teaching activities for managing their classes, such as assigning students to work in groups, in pairs or individual work and they tried to use different kinds of seating arrangement. This was also confirmed by the results of the questionnaire where students selected these three alternatives as the most used activities in class, along with discussions and role-play. The last two were selected by students as the most used by teachers and all of them felt good 48% and very good 52% when working together.

Effective Management of Mixed Level and Large Classes

According to students' opinion, large classes promote social relationships and bring them closer with each other, especially when they are working in small groups. Furthermore, large classes are a good opportunity for them to share ideas and to learn from each other with 84% of them responding to this question with strongly agree and agree. The findings indicated that students like to work with each other either in pairs or in groups, to be involved in different activities and to give peer feedback.

Giving peer feedback is another important point that helps teachers to manage large classes by giving students the opportunity to critically analyse, compare the responses and the work of each other with almost 49% of students who strongly agreed and 30% agreed with the idea of using peer feedback in the classroom. This large percentage shows that students like to give peer feedback because it helps them to learn better and to be involved in the lesson. Thus, it is recommended that teachers should give students the chance to give peer feedback as often as possible in order to teach them how to think critically and to be engaged to a greater extent in the lesson. However, 51% of the students agreed and 30% of them strongly agreed that large classes pose a challenge for them.

Another problem identified with large classes may be the issue of time management. Both teachers strongly agreed and 51% of students agreed that large classes are time consuming with 49% of them who were not sure whether large classes are time consuming or not. When observing the teaching process in these two classes, it was observed that teachers regularly prepared their lesson plans and had a variety of resources available to use in the classroom. During the interviews they also expressed their concern that large classes create problems and affect students learning achievements but on the other hand they believed that different methods and strategies help them in their class management. Both teachers believed that in order to manage a large class effectively they need to implement and use a variety of activities. They mentioned group work, pair work, different kinds of seating arrangements, and different activities as tools of managing the large number of students in their classrooms.

Whereas the interviews with the academic staff revealed slightly a different situation with large classes. Lecturers were not so much concerned with disruptive noise or behaviour as attendance was not compulsory so students could leave the classroom at any moment that they felt bored. However, what they found as a challenge was finding ways of drawing students' attention and keeping them engaged during the lectures, since the seating arrangements did not allow any flexibility for movement and interaction. One of the issues that was highlighted

during the interviews was the issue of knowledge and information retention, as it was the most common problem during the practical classes where it was confirmed that students had not retained any of the knowledge or information shared during the lectures. Yet, this is another issue, which should be further explored whether the problem is related to the number of students in the classroom or to other factors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the past teachers often took advantage of their role and exerted their authority to control the classes. They either raised their voices or used the mark as a punishment. This is often related to the lack of training and information about the different strategies that teachers should use under these circumstances. Teachers should realize that working with students, even when they are difficult to be dealt with, ensuring and respecting their rights, making them feel comfortable in class and in school are their responsibilities and duties to perform.

This study is very important and significant for young teachers and experienced ones as it shows ways of management particularly for larger classes. Further, it evaluates which methods and strategies are best for the teacher and for students. Another important aspect of this study is that it takes into account students' feedback about the effectiveness of the methods and strategies previously mentioned. When managing a large class, it is necessary to take into consideration students' feelings and reactions when they work together in groups or in pairs (as part of good classroom management) and how successful they are when they work together.

This study aimed to reveal that various strategies and techniques have an impact on classroom management, such as the seating arrangement, assigning students in groups, having in place routines and rules to maintain the discipline without teachers having to raise their voice. Extensive planning and planning a variety of activities, especially collaborative ones where students work safely and comfortably with each other in small groups, was used as a strategy to maximize Students Talking Time as compared to Teacher's Talking Time.

Large classes offer teachers the opportunity to improve their interpersonal skills as they try different ways to get to know each student as an individual. Another advantage of teaching large classes is that it gives them the opportunity to improve their teaching and presentation skills. The value of a large class is that it contains a diversity of students and learning styles, and they can use many different and fun ways of teaching. The students background, skills and interests, can be a valuable starting point for planning lessons and activities so that learning

becomes meaningful for students. Teachers will get the chance to improve their evaluation skills as they devise a variety of ways to tell whether their students have learned the material, instead of relying only on short answer exams, which may seem necessary for large classes. For instance, teachers can give their students in and out-of-class assignments that ask them what they have learned and if they have any question about what they have learned. Involving students in learning and in assessing can save teachers' time and reduce their workload.

There are many techniques that can be used by lecturers when teaching large classes such as, introducing the information while eliciting what the students already know, Think-pair-share, Question of the day, One-minute write, Demonstration technique and other strategies that allow all students to participate, instead of having individual students answer questions when called on (Science Education Resource Center at Carleton College, 2018). They help to promote student retention and learning of the material presented during lecture, it gives students practice in developing critical thinking skills, and enable instructors to assess how well the class is learning that day. Breaking up the lecture with these techniques not only provides format change to engage students, these activities allow students to immediately apply content and provides feedback to the instructor on student.

The use of blended classrooms means that teachers could also take advantage of the benefits of technology. The use of an engagement trigger in interactive lectures, such as images, videos or sounds can help to get the attention of students and then later keep them engaged by inviting them to contribute into the content.

Nevertheless, the teacher has the most significant role to play. We can use technology tools and other activities and strategies to get their attention, but it depends on teachers' gestures, expressions, tone and voice, their planning and preparation and their techniques to direct students' attention and make students apply what they have just learned in real-life.

In this way, we are shifting from a traditional way of lecturing where students are passive to a new way of lecturing where students are actively involved with their attention captured most of the time. This shift has also been noted in the materials and equipment that teachers are using in these classes. The use of Power Point Presentations and interactive white board allow lecturers to make use of the above-mentioned techniques, activities, or triggers and make large classes easier to be managed and increase the level of interaction.

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