CLASS SIZE IN ESP TEACHING

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Abstract: *Class size is a perennial question in education. Numerous studies have investigated the impact of class size on student achievement. The conventional wisdom among teachers, parents, students and policy makers is that smaller classes guarantee significant improvements in student learning. A number of studies support the importance of class size for student achievement; others strongly object this conclusion, showing that class size has little to no influence on student outcomes. There is a tendency to think that having fewer students in a class will allow a teacher to provide more one-to-one attention. Teachers, indeed, adapt their teaching to address the individual needs of the students. As the class becomes larger and more diverse, this task becomes increasingly challenging. In reality, there are no clear definitions of the ideal class size. Both large and small classes have advantages and disadvantages.*

Keywords: *size, advantages, disadvantages*

Class size is an ongoing educational problem. Most studies present small classes as being the most efficient, the only advantage of large classes being restricted to economic factors. Large classes and small classes have both advantages and disadvantages, but according to most teachers the disadvantages of large classes far outnumber the advantages.

The success of an ESP class depends largely on the size of the class being taught. Class size may vary significantly. Thus, an ESP teacher may have just one student or he/she may have around 100 students. The first question that arises when dealing with the issue of class size in ESP teaching is how it influences the quality of the teaching/learning process.

Rice (1902) stated that there was no clear relationship between class size and academic results. Schiefelbein and Simmons (1981) show that class size does not have a significant impact on students' achievement. Glass, McGaw and Smith (1981) pointed to the lower achievement associated with smaller classes, probably because of school policies for keeping difficult classes as small as possible. Elmore (1995) shows that reducing class size does not necessarily lead to a gain in learning achievement. Better results can only be achieved if teachers adapt their teaching style and strategies to the new situation.

There are no clear definitions of small classes and large classes. The notion of what represents a large class depends on "situation, purpose and experience" (Dudley-Evans, 2007:197). The more homogenous a class is in point of students' English level and objectives, the more successful the ESP class will be. Classes made up of sixty or seventy students whose English level is approximately similar and whose needs and objectives are the same turn out to be much easier to handle than heterogeneous classes made up of no more than twenty students having different English levels and studying ESP for different purposes.

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Hayes (1997) shows that there is no quantitative definition of what represents a large class, as both students' and teachers' perceptions may vary from context to context. The perception of "large" is closely connected with the dimension of the largest class a teacher usually teaches. In other words, if a teacher is used to teaching classes of up to 25 students, the experience of having to teach a class of more than 50 students will be felt as overwhelming. He/She might be tempted to give up, finding it impossible to get so many students to learn. A well-experienced teacher will know that a small class does not necessarily correlate with student learning. Students in large classes have the same chances to learn as students in small classes.

Advantages and disadvantages of large classes

Most teachers agree that teaching a large class is very challenging. A large class gives teachers the opportunity to improve their teaching strategies and techniques and to make the best use of time and resources in a very creative way. It also gives teachers the chance to improve their ability to organize the physical and psycho-social environments to avoid chaos. Since a large class is made up of a multitude of personalities, teachers can and should resort to a diversity of methods in order to meet the students' needs and expectations.

Being part of a large class can be beneficial to students. It stimulates them to actively participate in the lesson, to express their opinions on different topics and to listen to their colleagues' opinions and also learn from them. In large classes, it is essential to create a sense of community, one in which students feel free to ask questions, to ask for clarification without being afraid of being laughed at by their colleagues, a community in which students do not feel embarrassed when making mistakes. The more relaxed the atmosphere in the classroom is, the more encouraged students feel to participate in the lesson.

When dealing with large classes, it is vital to make the best use of the time available for teaching/learning. Spontaneous activities are more likely to have good results with small classes. When it comes to large classes, everything needs to be well planned. A carefully elaborated lesson plan will help the teacher go through all the stages of the lesson in a logical manner. It will also help the teacher feel confident and relaxed, which will make the students feel comfortable and willing to learn.

The materials chosen have to be in accordance with the students' language level as well as with their topics of interest. Students from large classes are prone to lose their interest in the topic much more easily than those in small classes. They also tend to start talking with their colleagues more often when they become bored. Hence, short activities which involve all the students or, at least, most of them, turn out to be a solution in such a situation.

One of the biggest drawbacks of large classes is represented by the teacher's incapacity to pay attention to each and every student. There are students who function as well in large classes and in small classes. They adapt easily and quickly to every new situation, they are very independent and never expect their teacher to guide them. On the other hand, there are students who permanently need their teacher's attention and encouragement. Their performance is usually poorer in a large class than in a small one.

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Involving as many students as possible in the interactive activities will enable teachers to build personal relationships with them. The slow learners have a tendency to take advantage of the crowded classroom and not participate in the lesson. It is the teacher's duty to raise their interest and to stimulate them to get engaged in the topic.

The larger the class is, the bigger the pressure the teacher feels when teaching and trying to reach his/her objectives. Teaching large classes is a big challenge for any teacher, no matter how experienced he/she is. Yet, there are strategies and techniques he/she can resort to in order to alleviate the difficulty of the situation. Encouraging student participation can be challenging in any class, but it can be especially difficult for teachers of large classes. First, it would be a good idea to have the students work in small groups of four to six students. When organizing them in groups, teachers should take into account the students' personalities and their level of language. None of them should be inhibited by the other participants in the activity. Even the most reluctant students should be given a chance to participate.

Pair work is also a very good alternative to practise conversations on different topics. The teacher poses a question to the class. Students are given a short time to think about their response and then they are asked to choose a partner to discuss their answers. Pairs of students are asked to present their ideas in front of the class, an activity which may lead to intense discussions in the class. This kind of activity is suitable even for the most introvert students because, functioning in a pair, they feel they are not on their own. Besides, being allowed to formulate their answers in advance, they feel they are not taken unawares by the teacher's task.

Teachers can promote student engagement by resorting to different tasks. At the end of the lesson, students are asked to summarize the lesson. These papers may serve various purposes. For instance, they can be used by the teacher as an assessment technique. By inviting students to express their opinions about how the lesson went, teachers themselves are stimulated to reconsider their teaching techniques and strategies and improve the weak points, if there are any.

Student involvement is closely connected with the teacher's behaviour and attitude. A less authoritative tone is meant to make students feel more comfortable and less fearful of making mistakes. Teachers should be appreciative of students' good answers. Mistakes should be corrected with due consideration, without being harsh and without embarrassing students in front of the class. In order to discourage peer judgement, teachers should try to create an atmosphere of trust, respect and constructive competition.

One problem that occurs with large classes is that of grading. There are several ways to incorporate more formative assessment into the English class that do not increase the teacher's workload and offer both teachers and students the feedback they need. Communication-oriented activities give students the opportunity to improve their skills and to show their progress. When dealing with large classes, teachers may have a lot of difficulty in grading homework, papers and exams. In order to make this task easier, teachers can divide students in groups and give them collective homework. It is essential that all the students should have equal roles and that each and every student should bring his/her contribution to the fulfilment of the task. Papers and exams are less time-consuming if teachers replace essays with multiple choice tests which have numerous advantages.

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Teachers can also resort to new feedback procedures, such as "self-checking using teacher checklist, self-checking through consultation with other groups; snowballing (check answers in pairs, then fours, then eights); peer assessment of written work; taking questions instead of giving feedback and answers" (Dudley-Evans, 2007:200).

Although it is hard to believe, there are also advantages of teaching a large class and learning in a large class. They may be noisy, but they are more interesting and exciting to work with. They are such a complex mixture of personalities that the lesson will never be monotonous and predictable. Activities will take longer to complete, which means the teacher will rarely have to resort to fillers. According to Harmer, "big groups have disadvantages, of course, but they also have one main advantage - they are bigger, so humour is funnier, drama is more dramatic and a good class feeling is warmer and more enveloping than it is in a small group. We should never shy away from the potential that lecturing, acting and joking offer in such a situation. We can organize activities which allow students to perform in this way, too". (Harmer, 2013:127)

Advantages and disadvantages of small classes

Although it may seem that having fewer students in a class is the ideal situation for both teachers and students, fewer is not necessarily better when it comes to students. Small class sizes do have a lot of advantages, but they also have some disadvantages which may have a big impact on the process of learning/teaching. One of the advantages of small classes is that teachers have more opportunities to get to know each and every student, being able to tailor their teaching strategies to meet individual learning needs. Students who have difficulty with the course material are more likely to receive extra help in a smaller class. Very good students also benefit from learning in a small class as teachers have more time to offer them more demanding and more challenging tasks.

One of the disadvantages of small classes is the lack of diversity. Small classes rarely have a diverse array of members; hence they rarely offer students the chance to study in a diverse setting. In small classes, students have the tendency to race through the topics, without paying proper attention to all the aspects of the topics discussed. There are certain activities that require a minimum number of participants. Activities such as small group projects cannot be made use of because of the limited number of students and the restricted ways in which they can be combined in groups. Some students feel more comfortable in the anonymity offered by being a member of a large class. In a small class he/she is in the centre of attention much more often than he/she would be a large one.

In conclusion, what we label as "large classes" is closely connected with context and expectations. Different teachers have very different definitions of large classes. Since the main goal of a language class is to improve students' ability to communicate, there must be opportunities for frequent student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction, monitored practice and individual feedback during the class.

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