TEACHING READING IN LARGE CLASSES

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This article deals with the problem of overcrowded classes. Ideas from research findings are given in an attempt to approach the teaching of reading at tertiary and secondary levels. This study is mainly based on the analysis of five pedagogical principles that emerged from the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project in the United Kingdom (1986- 1999). Emphasis is also made on two important general principles emerging from the project: being realistic and giving more responsibility to the learner. Practical suggestions from research on reading are made based on the principles stated.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to give some insights for the teaching of reading in large classes based on the analysis and evaluation of proposals made by research in this field. First, I will take into account the five specific pedagogical principles which have emerged from research and the analysis made by teachers in the M.Ed TESOL group in Leeds University to explore possibilities of teaching reading to large groups. Next, I will try to make my own proposals based on my experience and insights from literature in the field as well as from suggestions made by teachers and researchers for reading. Last, I will draw some conclusions from this analysis.

1. The problem

For a long time the problem of overcrowded classes in language teaching has been neglected or overlooked. Perhaps it was assumed that it was a lack of economical resources in our Third World countries and, therefore, there was nothing to do to tackle this problem. Furthermore, all research work in TESOL advocated the "ideal" number as being 10-15 or 10-20 for successful teaching. Teachers got used to feeling guilty about the kinds of teaching the students were receiving and kept struggling with such a perception of the "ideal number". As a result of this state of affairs, many attempts to solve the problem, at least in an empirical way, had been carried out. Also, different approaches have been proposed. For example, through individualised instruction (Fedyk et al: 1979, 44-45), programmed instruction and open education (Itzen: 1986, 27).

It was not until 1986 when the Lancaster — Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project began to grow and expand with four major tasks: creating a bibliography, networking, organising colloquia and promoting and undertaking research (Coleman: 1989, 2). Through these activities, the project received not only support from teachers and researchers but also raised a lot of interest and responses to their inquires. In addition to these activities, the project was in charge of encouraging research, performing research and disseminating research findings.

2. Pedagogical implications of research

The Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project, above-mentioned, conducted research in order to investigate the teachers' perceptions of class size and the difficulties involved in teaching large classes through questionnaires administered to groups of teachers from different countries. Based on the analysis of the responses, the project identified the following main difficulties as perceived by teachers of large classes: discomfort, control, evaluation, individual attention and learning.

These are the five specific principles derived from the analysis of the outlined difficulties:

2.1 Specific principles

About discomfort. They suggest that if teachers feel exposed and stressful when they are "performing" in front of a large class, then we should consider ways of organising the class so that the teacher is not always exposed and in the spotlight. This principle, according to Coleman (1989), means asking learners to work as individuals or immediate neighbours or — if classroom space allows it — in groups and also implies giving more responsibility to learners to organise their own learning.

About control. According to their findings, they suggest that if teachers feel that it is difficult to monitor everything that happens in the class, then it is necessary to consider ways of organising the class so that the teacher does not need to control everything that happens in the class. Again this principle implies giving more responsibility to the learner.

About evaluation. In relation to this principle they suggest that to avoid teachers feeling that

it is a strain to evaluate everything that learners do, write or say, it should be advisable to organise in-class activities and out-of-class activities so that the teacher does not need to evaluate everything that is produced. This principle also suggests deciding either to give more responsibility to learners by asking them to evaluate some of their own or peer's work or deciding that not everything which is produced actually needs to be evaluated.

About individual attention. According to this principle, if teachers feel that it is difficult for them to know their learners as individuals, then they suggest considering ways of organising activities so that learners and teachers have increased opportunities to address each other as individuals. If we adopt solutions for the former situations, such as allowing learners to work alone or in pairs or larger groups, then the teacher is released from the obligation of addressing and controlling the whole class. This, in turn, leaves space for the teacher to observe individual learners or groups of learners and to work with them. There might be situations in which the size of the class is extremely large and the teacher can not make individual contact in every lesson. However, by giving responsibilities to the learners, the teacher increases the opportunities to get to know them and their learning.

About learning. If teachers feel that traditional ways of teaching in large classes are not effective in helping most learners to learn, then they should consider ways of organising activities so that emphasis is placed on promoting learning by learners rather than on teaching by teachers.

2.2 Pedagogical implications

Be realistic. They consider that most teachers feel that there are certain things, which they

ought to do in their classes (or before their classes). These ideas might be derived from their initial teacher training and could be done if they are teaching small classes. They suggest that as teachers of large classes, we have to be realistic; that is, we have to recognise that there are some things, which are simply impossible in large classes. They say that we should not feel guilty if we can not do everything we would like to be able to do. Therefore, feeling guilty is not useful and is a waste of emotional energy.

Give more responsibility to the learners. According to this principle, they consider that teachers feel that they have to be responsible for everything that happens in the language learning class and for a lot of things that happen outside it as well. The bigger a class is, the more difficult it becomes to deal with all of this responsibility. Therefore, one of the things which we have to look at is the possibility of sharing some of this responsibility with the learners. This may be difficult at first, but it can be very exciting.

3. Practical suggestions to deal with reading in large classes

3.1 Dealing with reading

When planning reading activities, the teacher must bear in mind the objective of the activity. It is important to think about the nature of the course. It could either be integrated into a language-focussed course or for academic purposes.

If we consider that it is important to get students involved in the selection of their readings according to their interest and level of language, we also have to get the students to know the rationale of reading, its purposes and the use of strategies for efficient reading. Tomlinson and Ellis (1987) have designed some

reading tasks which are based on passages and excerpts from Nuttall (1982). They devised these tasks using introductory passages about what reading is, reasons for reading, getting a message from a text and the communication process. I personally have devised materials based on this rationale for intermediate courses in the university mainly for the initial stage of this level. I consider this task useful since it makes the student aware of the important principles of reading such as reading with a purpose, the reader's role in the process of reading, techniques and strategies to make sense of the text, organisation of the text, study skills, etc.

Littlejohn (1987: 38-39) also suggests some procedures to work with when there are large groups: The class is divided into six groups. There is one "upper" group (group blue), three "middle" groups (groups Yellow, Brown, and Red) and two "lower" groups (groups Orange and Green). The class is about to work on a reading passage:

• Through a general discussion with the whole class, the teacher stimulates the pupil's interest in the topic and elicits some of the new vocabulary that will come in the passage.

• The teacher puts two or three pre-reading questions on the board.

• Pupils read silently to find the answers.

• The teacher elicits the answers from the pupils and continues with a few more general comprehension questions.

• Groups Orange and Green do a gap-filling vocabulary exercise. Yellow, Brown and Red write their answers to some questions on the board. Group Blue writes a dialogue of what the characters in the passage would have said to each other.

• The teacher moves around the class, helping the pupils. If they finish before the

others, they move to further exercises or try the next level of difficulty.

• The lesson concludes with the teacher getting feedback on the answers from each group.

3.2 Dealing with group work

Several articles on magazines and journals have been published with suggestions about organisation of large groups. For example, Sarwar et al. (1985) give the following suggestions:

• Students can be divided into groups of not less than four and no more than eight in numbers. The groups can either be made using students' own choice or after a test of students' English proficiency level. If the teacher decides to form groups on the basis of English Proficiency Level, a test would have to be given before forming the groups. On the other hand, groups using students' own choice can be made by students themselves.

• Ask students to choose a permanent **Group-Leader** or for shorter periods such as for one month or one week. The teacher has then only to remain the "group-leader" occasionally to give the weaker ones a chance to perform when the students work in groups. They can choose **Group-Captains** who have a better language proficiency than the others. They can help in peer-teaching as well as in organisational matters. For instance, if there are twenty groups, four groups can be assigned to each "Group-Captain". They can check on the "ongoing activities", attendance, and bringing teaching materials to class, etc.

• The students should be asked to sit with their own groups so that they can be either in the classroom or in places that are available outside the classroom for tasks that do not require integration of all the groups.

Littlejohn (1987) suggests grouping students according to shared common interests: a topic to write about or in our case, to get information from reading or according to their needs as either you or they perceive them. For instance, one group could be involved in a grammar exercise, another some writing or reading practice according to their ability in English so that they can work at their own pace and level.

Following Littlejohn, the easiest way to form groups according to their level of English is to divide the pupils into roughly three or four bands based on the teacher's experience with the class; for example, "upper", "middle" and "lower". Then with each band, divide the class into smaller groups — six or seven pupils in each. It might be useful to give each group a name such as a colour, geographical places, neighbourhood, etc. He advises avoiding letters or numbers as this can have a negative effect on motivation.

As tasks can be performed individually at the beginning stage of a class, then by pairs and finally by large groups, it would be advisable to see some suggestions for pair work organisation. Samuda and Bruton (1978) propose pair work as a means of developing students' confidence in a command of both the spoken and written forms of language and as a tool for foreign language teachers. They refer to problem-solving tasks with a language focus.

Each student is given information, some of which is shared with his/her partner and some of which is different. Samuda and Bruton suggest **tango seating** for classroom arrangement as a means of overcoming the problem of large classes. This organisation has two steps. First they are put in five rows of pairs four deep. The teacher then has one

student in each pair turn his/her chair around to face in the opposite direction, while still being able to talk to his/her partner. The result is that half of the class is now facing one way and the teacher can now show the other half a different way, by placing the stimuli at opposite ends of the room.

This arrangement is not only useful for language-focused classes, but also for reading tasks to work in larger groups since all the teacher has to do is ask every other pair to turn around and face the pair behind them, thus forming a group of four. The teacher also benefits from this quick maneuver, but the main benefit or advantage is that he can divide the information by producing only two large cards. The value for reading, according to Samuda and Bruton (ibid), is limited, but there are tasks which require only sharing the information that each member has. Teachers can also use maps, diagrams, graphs, forms, etc. to provide interesting and valuable input for dividing information between pairs and feeding it into activities that require pair work.

3.3 Dealing with group work outcomes

Allwright (MET), gives some suggestions to deal with the findings of a whole class group, mainly related to oral presentations which are sometimes "tedious but deserve to be shared by some form of reporting". I personally find the following procedures very useful for organising information resulting from some reading/writing activities. He suggests two alternatives: either use the **blackboard** as response chart or use **posters**. In the first case, he advises to adapt or to design tasks so that they require the groups to reduce their discussions to a set of answers to multiple-choice questions. For example, the task could be to make collective sense of a text or to work

through a cloze passage. While the groups are working, he prepares the blackboard as a chart on which all the groups can enter their choices as they finish their discussions. The result, according to Allwright, for twelve groups working on five questions may look like this:

Groups

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Q1	a	a	a	b	a	a	a	a	b	b	a	b
Q2	b	c	c	c	a	a	b	c	c	c	c	d
Q3	d	a	d	c	d	c	b	a	c	d	a	c
Q4	a	a	a	a	d	d	b	b	c	d	a	c
Q5	c	c	c	b	c	c	d	d	a	c	b	c

The aim of this display of all the groups' choices is to spark off considerable discussion and allow the groups to defend their decisions. When the blackboard space is inadequate, he suggests using the OHP or an alternative portable response chart. This is considered to be an alternative only when all the groups have been given the same task.

Allwright also suggests the use of posters as a possible solution when there are groups of more than 80 students. Groups are asked to produce a poster recording its discussions and conclusions. These are then displayed around the walls of the room as they are finished. Each group is asked to find a representative to stand by and respond to questions about its poster, while the others circulate and ask questions about all the posters. The advantage of the poster display technique, quite apart from the avoidance of tedium and tension, Allwright says, is that the process of designing a poster display seems itself to be more stimulating than that of composing a group report in purely verbal form. I find these two techniques very useful for analysing reading outcomes, specially

at the advanced level when the students are given entire scientific or humanistic articles to read and then produce some kind of information gap or filling.

3.4 Individualised instruction for large groups

One of the principles of education commonly suggested for dealing with large groups is individualised instruction, even though its implications must be carefully examined. However, Fedyk and Williams (1979) propose individualised instruction as a solution for large groups based on their experience at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala. They started their project by investigating several areas such as defining individualisation, examining the roles of teachers and students, writing performance objectives and developing materials, designing a curriculum, making the transition from a traditional to an individualised classroom and evaluating testing procedures.

Among the interpretations given to individualised instruction, Fedyk and Williams report the common practice of allowing the individual student to learn at his/her own pace and of having the student select and use materials that fall within his/her area of interest. When examining the teacher-student relationship, they point out Altman's (1972: 209) principle — "The Three R's of individualisation: Re-education, Responsibility and Relevance". They quote Altman: "We must show the learner how to assume the major responsibility for his learning". Altman also delineates the student's responsibility, concluding that "each student must bear the primary responsibility for his/her own learning".

From their research project, they came out with the following ideas: teaching mini-courses in

English, organising extracurricular clubs, providing a variety of scheduling possibilities, using teaching assistants, promoting team teaching, and using English speakers in the community.

This project required students to participate in various activities, including reading assignments for discussion and reports, role-playing and individual projects. For these projects the students made individualised learning packets, analysed textbooks and made appropriate adaptations for the individualised class, visited schools and interviewed the school directors about the possibility of implementing an individualised programme, and prepared various types of texts.

4. Conclusions

I have tried to cover important aspects of teaching skills in large groups but have focused my interest on reading, since my main concern is to propose some ideas for the implementation of projects at tertiary and secondary levels. Having this objective in mind, I overviewed the general and common problem of teaching English to large groups to discover that there is research going on in an attempt to solve this problem.

Based on this initial research, two important general principles of action to cope with the problem of large groups have come out: Being realistic and giving more responsibility to the learner and also, some suggestions to deal with the five specific principles identified in the Leeds-Lancaster research were evaluated.

The reader should take into account that the research project formerly mentioned two important general principles (being realistic and giving more responsibility to the learners) and that suggestions for the five specific principles

of action to cope with the problem were analysed and evaluated. These suggestions are based on teachers' published literature and my own experience.

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