

# **Barriers in Teaching English in Large Classes: Voice of an Indonesian English Language Teacher**

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## **Abstract**

This case study aimed at identifying barriers encountered by an English teaching who taught in a large class and how he dealt with them. The participant of this study was an English teacher in a private owned school and the number of students he taught was more than 30, which is considered a large class for language learning. An in-depth interview and classroom observation were conducted to gain data. Analysis was done in an iterative way. This study revealed seven issues which were encountered by the participant in his EFL class. All of which were associated with the difficulty to 1) evaluate and provide individual feedback, 2) control students' (discipline), 3) achieve learning effectiveness and learning outcomes, 4) engage students to the lesson, 5) pay individual attention. Other issues occurring in his class were the use of local language by the students in EFL class and decreased interest (motivation) to learn English. In order to tackle these issues, the teacher employed two strategies, namely: 1) using a variety of games and 2) setting an outdoor English class in order to attract students' attention.

**Keywords:** *Barriers, Strategies, EFL, Large Class.*

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

### **Large Class in EFL contexts**

English in Indonesia is treated as a foreign language (FL), therefore the learners are called EFL learners. English is also made compulsory in any secondary school and higher education, thus every learner has to study English. Further, in most Indonesian schools, the number of students in a class may vary. In some schools an EFL class may consist of less than 20 students, while in some other schools, the students number could be more than that.

A class comprising of 30 students is considered a normal class and if it exceeds that number, then such a class could be classified as a large class. For language learning, a class with more than 20 students might be perceived as a large class. However, there is no clear definition of what constitute a large class (Hayes, 1997). In this study, a class consisting of more than 20 students is considered a large class. Sulistoyawati (2012) points out that the ideal number of students in one class that has been suggested by Indonesian government is ranged from 20 to 32 students. Large class has created a number of challenges to a EFL teachers, especially in Indonesia. These challenges have influenced the quality of language learning as well as the learning outcomes in foreign language learning.

## B. LITERATURE REVIEWS

### Issues in the Teaching of English in Large Classes

There are three commonly perceived problems associated with teaching in large classes, namely physical, psychological and technical (Xu, 2001). Xu further explain this problems in details:

*“The teachers in large classes may feel physically weary; they may unawaresly speak louder and move more often or longer distances than they do in small classes etc. Psychologically, some teachers feel it intimidating to face a large “crowd” of students, especially when they don’t have much idea who their students are and what their students are expecting from them. To the teachers in large classes, students are not “people” but “faces” ..... Other problems such as monitoring attendance and checking assignments are also constantly worrying many teachers involved in large class teaching.”*

A report published by British Council (2015) shows a number of challenges in teaching English in large classes. These are: a) It's difficult to keep good discipline going in a large class; b) You have to provide for more children of different ages and different abilities, wanting to learn different things at different speeds and in different ways; c) You can't easily give each child the individual attention they need; and d) You may not have enough books or teaching and learning aids.

Other study conducted by Wang and Zang (2011) in China also investigated what chinese English teachers experienced in large classes. Their study reveals a number of challenges that teacher faced when teaching in large classess. The chinese teachers in their study found it difficult to : 1) discipline the class, especially for primary and middle school students who are lack of self-control; 2) to satisfy all the needs of students who have different interests, personalities and capabilities; 3) to organize efficient class activities due to the constraints of time and space; 4) to provide equal chances for the students to participate and practice; 5) to give timely and effective feedback and evaluation.

Further, Hayes (1997) also points out the problems which teacher encountered in large class, namely: discomfort, control, individual attention, evaluation and learning effectiveness. These problems could be problematic to the teachers, however learners themselves might think that it is not a problem. As Xu (2011) argues that:

*“In fact, what the teachers perceive as problems associated with large classes sometimes may not be so problematic to the students”.*

One of the latest studies concerning this issue was conducted by Bahansha (2013) in Saudi Arabia. His study reveals that all participants find it daunting to teach large classes. The participant in his study also ccommented that the students learning outcome was unsatisfactory despite their efforts to elevate the level of language learning in such context. What the teachers urged the need to reduce the number of students in one class. Further, his findings shed the light on some useful and effective methods to be applied in large classes which may facilitate the language teaching and learning. Another recent study in Afganisthan (Rohin, 2013) also suggest that large classes create problems in management and control of class and also, affect the students learning achievement/ outcomes.

From the studies above, we can sum up some challenges which are caused by large classes. These include: discomfort, control, individual attention, evaluation

learning, effectiveness (Hayes, 1997), learning achievement/ outcomes (Rohin, 2013; Bahansha, 2013). physical, psychological and technical problems (Xu, 2011).

### **Teaching Strategies to Tackle these Issues**

The following studies point out teachers' strategy to teaching English in large classes. Rohin study (2013) in Afganistan suggest that teachers are demanded to improve their pedagogical knowledge and some effective methods such as group work, jigsaw discussion and so on. Bahansha (2013) advised the importance of exploring various methods and applying effective strategies that minimize the effects of large classes and elevating the teaching and learning level to its highest standard. Different argument is proposed by Sulistyowati (2012) who conducted a study in Indonesia by involving teachers in english for young learners classess. The participants of her study beleied that the number of students did not determine the attainment of learning outcome. However, they beleived that teachers "must come up with engaging activities that keep all of their students interested and participating with the goal of improving their communication skills". Further Xu (2011) suggested that:

*"Technically, teachers have to be capable of using microphones and OHPs properly to make their students hear and see clearly. Inadequate use of such classroom equipment may lead to the lack of interest and involvement of the students in the classroom learning"*

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks to understand what an EFL teacher in Indonesia encountered when teaching in large class. To researcher's best knowledge, only a few studies have been carried out in Indonesia concerning this issues despite the large number of existing studies carried out in other countries. One of these studies was conducted by Sulistyowati (2012) who investigated the challenges to teaching young learners in Indonesia, while the current study will be conducted in a private secondary school whose learners are differed from those of children class. For this reason, this study is conducted. Considering the context above, the overriding questions investigated in this study were: 1) What challenges does an English teacher encounter in teaching English in a large class?; and 2) How do teacher deal with these challenges in teaching English in a large class?.

## **C. RESEARCH METHOD**

The current study is case study in nature as its primary aim is to gain deeper understanding on the challenges which teacher experiences when he is teaching in large classes. Zaidah (2007, 2007: h.1) argues that case study provides opportunity to collect information more deeply.

### **Participant**

The subject of this study is an English teacher teaching in a private school in East Lombok Regency Indonesia. I chose him as the participant due to researcher personal relation with him which allows the researcher to gain data more easily. He has been teaching English in this school for more than five years. Further, he has been teaching in large classess. Other reason for choosing him to be the participant is that he is ready to be part of this research voluntarily. Further, we employed purposive sampling technique to choose the research participant. Jupp (2006) argues that purposive sampling techniques is form of a non-probability sampling in which researcher's decision to include individuals as research participants are based upon based upon a variety of criteria which may

include specialist knowledge of the research issue, or capacity and willingness to participate in the research.

#### **Data Collection Procedures and analysis**

Primary data was collected from teacher's personal opinion and secondary data was from classroom observation or other written and published documents relevant to this study. For this study, We employed indepth interviews to the participants. We also did classroom observation to gain supporting data. In qualitative study, researcher will be the main istrument. The interview was recorded after having consent from the participant.

Collected data were analysed simulatenously as the data colletion in progress because this is the common practice in qualitative study. O'Connor and Gibson (n.d) suggest the following steps to analyze qualitative data which include a) organizing the data, b) finding and organizing ideas and concepts, c) building overarching themes in the data, d) ensuring reliability and validity in the data analysis and in the findings, e) finding possible and plausible explanations for findings, and e) an overview of the final steps.

## **D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **EFL Teacher's Challenges in Teaching English in Large Classes**

The purpose of this study was to identify what challenges an EFL teacher encountered in a large class. Sulistoyawati (2012) argues that the ideal number of students in one class that has been suggested by Indonesian government is ranged from 20 to 32 students. As the class where this teacher taught was more than 32 students, then it was classified into large class.

A large body or studies suggest that teaching in English in a large class may create an array of problems. As reported by British Council (2015), teaching English in large classes would results in the difficulty to keep good discipline, to provide for more children of different ages and different abilities, wanting to learn different things at different speeds and in different ways, to give each child the individual attention they need; and to provide enough books or teaching and learning aids. As a result, all of these problems could influence the learning process and affect the attainment of the learning outcomes. Further, these issues would cause problems for teachers to organize efficient class activities due to the constraints of time and space. The following chart summarizes the findings of this study.

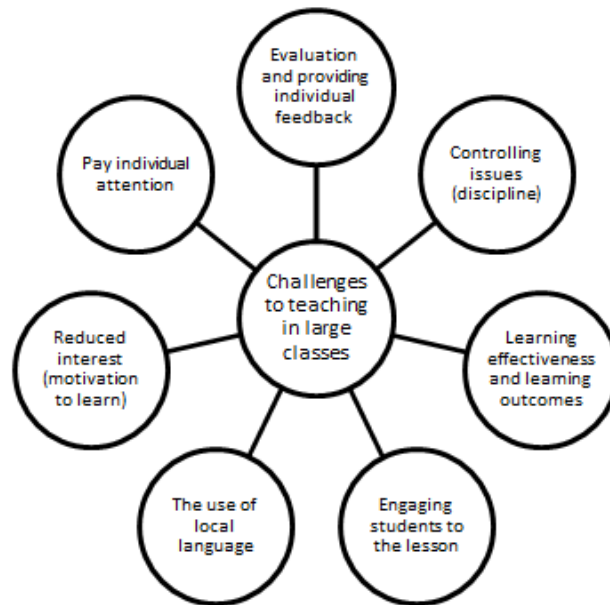


Figure 1 Challenges teacher encountered in a big class

From interviews with the EFL teacher, there were a number of issues which he encountered when he was teaching. First, the students were noisy and the teacher was unable to control the students. When we observed the classes, we saw some students were making noise. They did not pay attention to the teacher's explanation. Although the teacher had tried to remind them and to get their attention frequently, the students would stop for a while and made noise again. When they were doing so, they disturbed other students. According to the teacher, this happened almost in every meeting. These findings are in agreement with Wang and Zang's (2011) findings. The teachers in their study were found to have difficulty to discipline the class, especially for primary and middle school students who are lack of self-control. Although teacher have made rule in English class, such a regulation did not work as the number of students in the class was too many. As a result, the teacher found it difficult to get everyone's attention and to get engaged optimally. Final consequence of this issue is that the learning process would not be effective. For instance, it would influence the students learning outcomes and teachers' personal goals.

Second, our interview and observation showed that the students were not motivated learn English. This might be caused by the status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia education system, where learning English is not students' choice, instead it is a must and every secondary schools student has to take it. If English becomes an optional language, then only those with high interest would learn it. If this happens, EFL teacher would find the teaching English interesting as his students have intrinsic motivation to learn. Further, the students' lack of interest in learning English caused them to be lazy to learn English. Other consequence of this is that students did not pay attention when their teacher explained the materials.

Wang and Zang study (2011) highlight that Chinese teacher teaching in English in large classes believed encountered an issue to give timely and effective feedback and evaluation. This is also the case in this study in which the teacher of this study believed that it was difficult for him to assess the whole students learning progress because of the class size. For instance if he wanted to measure students speaking skills or to check students' writing, he would spend too much time because assessing those skills requiring personal feedback. Xu (2011) also claimed that large

classes would cause problems such as “*monitoring attendance and checking assignments*”. This finding also supports Hayes’ study (1997) who point out that teachers teaching in large classes were worried if they were unable to check all of the students’ works.

Hayes Study (ibid) revealed that large class would make teachers in EFL class unable to pay individual attention to all learners. In this study, the same issue also occurred and the respondent admitted that he found it challenging to pay attention to each student in this class. This finding also is in line with that of the study by British Council (2015) stating that large class would make teacher difficult to give each individual to pay attention they need. Wang and Zang further (2011) argue that Chinese teachers in their study were unable to provide equal chances for the students to participate and practice as well as to satisfy all the needs of students who have different interests, personalities and capabilities. The failure to pay attention to each student would generate another problem. In this study the teacher admitted that most of the students in his English classes were passive when he was teaching speaking. There were only a few of them responding to his questions. We could also observe this reality in his classroom in which only a few students in the front rows would answer his questions or to give questions.

Another finding revealed from interview and observation was that the large class size influenced the students’ preference to use the local language (*Sasak* language). As the teacher respondent said that the students in his class preferred to speak local language to practicing English. Probably this was caused by the less chance provided by the teacher for the students to practice in English in his class.

### **Strategies employed to respond the challenges**

From the interview and classroom observation, it was identified that there were only two strategies which he preferred to respond to the problems. First, he employed a variety of games to attract students’ attention and second, he took the students to learn English outdoor. He found that these strategies useful to deal with the barriers occurring in that large class.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

### **Conclusions**

From the discussion chapter, this study reveals seven challenges which the teacher encountered when he was teaching English in large classes. These include the difficulty are related to 1) evaluation and providing individual feedback, 2) Controlling issues (discipline), 3) learning effectiveness and learning outcomes, 4) Engaging students to the lesson, 5) the use of local language by the students, 6) Reduced interest (motivation) to learn English and 7) Pay individual attention. The findings of this study are in agreement with other studies such as report by British Council (2015), Zang and Wang (2011) and Xu (2011). In order to tackle these issues, the teacher employed two strategies. These are 1) using a variety of games and 2) setting and outdoor English class in order to attract students’ attention.

### **Recommendation**

The findings of this study may not shed a new insight on this issue, however this study would provide a good practical feedback to the teacher and to other English teachers especially for those teaching in similar context, in large classes. Further, from this study I would assume that large classes might not be the single cause of the

learning ineffectiveness, low students outcomes or students interest in learning English. These could also be caused by the lack of facilities or teachers methods in teaching. Therefore, it is worth improving teaching strategies to deal with these issues. Further it is also worth considering a wider study, for instance in one regency, to investigate general issues experienced by English teachers.

### **Limitation of the study**

Due to the time constraint of conducting interviews and observation, this study might miss some more vital causes of why large classes became so challenging to the responding of this study. We would argue that there might be other reasons why teachers believe that large classes as the major cause of teachers' difficulty in teaching English. Also, we perceived that all of these challenges might have connection. In other words, some problems could be caused by a single problem and a single effect could be triggered by a number of causes. To put it simply, although the findings of this study have uncovered the teachers' obstacles in teaching English in large classes, further study needs to be done in order to find the relation or connection of each issues and to identify what the most appropriate way to tackle them. Finally this case study was not meant to generalize findings, thus it did not reflect the situation of other schools. However, this study can be transferred to other research contexts which have similar social features.

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