Strategies for Teaching Large Classes at University Level: Experiences from the Communication Skills Centre

L. Chipunza

Advanced Level Students' Perceptions of the Causes and Effects of HIV/AIDS: A Case Study of Masvingo Urban High Schools, Zimbabwe

Excellent Chireshe and Regis Chireshe

Pupils' Drawings of what is Inside Themselves: A Case Study in Zimbabwe

Viola Manokore and Michael J. Reiss

A Comparison in Performance Between Mature Entry Students and Traditional (A-Level) Entry Students at the University of Zimbabwe

Fred Zindi

Globalisation: A Menace To African Values And Education?

Oni A. Adesoji

University Business Education in Southern Africa: A Zambian Focus

Nessan J. Ronan
STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING LARGE CLASSES AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL: EXPERIENCES FROM THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS CENTRE

L. Chipunza
Department of Linguistics
University of Zimbabwe

Abstract
Teaching large classes at any given level is indeed a challenge but one that is certainly not beyond the skillful, creative, and imaginative practitioner. This paper sets to suggest ways in which teaching and learning an intellectual skill can be enhanced through increased participation by the learner. This is in keeping with the thinking that the object of any learning event, in any class size is involvement and actual practice which should lead to the learner owning the skill that he/she gains through experience and not through telling.

Introduction
The teaching and imparting of skills is a complicated process made worse by the growing numbers of learners in most teaching rooms throughout the world. Meanwhile, educational administrators and practitioners in the field of Communication Skills have long been debating over the question whether class size affects teacher and learner performance. But first, one needs to identify what size of class is considered large. According to Nolasco and Arthur (1988), Kumar (1992) and Medgers (1986), a large class is generally perceived as one which has anything between 35 and 60 learners. The generally recommended class size is 24 and for skills training 15. At the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), a lecturer in Communication skills may expect in the course of a week to teach for 12-14 hours, during which he/she comes into contact with about 840 students per week. With such figures, it is not difficult to imagine that the resultant workload is often overwhelming, leaving the practitioner little time to do what is perhaps more essential and that is, planning his/her lectures well and embarking on research which should help to inform his/her teaching.
As can be expected too, any large group brings with it problems of homogeneity, age, cultural interests, educational background, and different levels of proficiency etc so that in essence, the teacher is at the far end of the scale, faced with a class of 60 individuals (in some cases 120 or more). In addition, a group of learners which used to be seen in near-Dickensian terms as a ‘faceless monolithic’ mass waiting to have their heads filled with knowledge, is today seen as an organic unit comprising learners of the most diverse nature. Personal differences in learning styles, motivation, etc should now not only be tolerated, but encouraged in the new teaching and learning environment which emphatically views the learner as the centre of all educational activities.

In brief, the teacher today is expected to cope with problems arising from the dialectic relationship between group coherence and group divergence, in a class of 60 or more, a task of immense proportions which needs a teacher of extraordinary ability and talent if instructional goals are to be achieved for the individual as well as for the group. It is evidently clear therefore that the large class phenomenon is complex and because it is widespread and unavoidable in certain circumstances, especially in developing countries, it is well worth investigating.

What is Involved in Skills Training?

Skill has been defined in a number of different ways but for purposes of this paper, I shall adopt the one given in the Oxford Dictionary which defines it as “the acquisition of practical knowledge in combination with ability”. As defined, the nature of the discipline involves two aspects of learning, the knowing and the how part. Teaching a skill therefore is vastly different from teaching content in that while the teaching of content involves basically the teaching of factual knowledge and comprehending that information, the teaching of skills is clearly marked by demonstrations and practice training. For obvious reasons, the latter dictates the existence of a very low teacher-student ratio.

Now, given the view that Communication Skills is not primarily a mental discipline, but a tool for communication, this means therefore that teaching it and assessing it should shift away from the traditional area of concern with the code of a language and instead teach and assess the uses that learners can make of the code.

It is also my contention in this paper that skills cannot be lectured but taught, or instructed and it is on this premise that the term teach shall be used.
Too often, both types of linguists, pure and applied are bogged down in a mass of theory and this paper aims to turn theory into good practice and be instrumental in the enhancement of the quality of work produced not only on the teacher’s work desk but also in the teaching venue. The paper shall therefore suggest a breakaway from the more traditional transmissive mode of teaching to a more communicative and practice based approach where the learner remains at the centre of the learning process. This is in keeping with the thinking that the object of any learning event (in any class size) is involvement; and the greater the involvement of the learner in the learning process, the greater the commitment to learning.

The strategies discussed in this paper are by no means new nor are they peculiar to the teaching of Communication Skills. What follows is an attempt to show how proven strategies for normal size classes can and have been tailored to suit the large class situation in the teaching and transference of intellectual skills. They are therefore not prescriptive as operating conditions differ from situation to situation. Exploration of a few of these strategies together with relevant examples would however help serve the desired purpose.

Some Strategies for Teaching Large Classes

Lesson Preparation

The success of many a lesson with a large class is made or broken at this stage. Teachers faced with this phenomenon should guard against despondency and the resultant lack of adequate preparation. It is better to err on the side of over preparation rather than under preparation. Preparation must be more careful and complete. Matters that include course design, materials design, time-tableing, venue, should be well underway before the actual teaching begins. The physical learning environment should be carefully studied as much of the teaching will not take place in purpose-built accommodation. For purposes of skills training, the ideal would be a room which would allow a horse shoe or boardroom type of desk plan and furniture that can be moved around more easily to accommodate the different teaching and learning activities that will take place.

At UZ however, because of the large numbers of students, most of the teaching takes place in either small classrooms or lecture theatres whose sitting arrangement does not encourage interaction or participation and in a way, sets the teacher apart. Ways around this problem shall be discussed alongside the relevant methodology.
Lecturing

In the wide range of learning methods, the one that comes to the minds of most teachers and yet is largely inappropriate for the acquisition of skills, is lecturing. Most lecturers feel they must strive to become inspirational orators in front of an audience, and if they cannot, then they will not have been successful. Here, it is important to sound a word of caution, that just because someone is teaching, is no guarantee that learning is taking place. In a large group, it is easy for students to hide in a passive audience and one is hardly challenged or compelled to confront difficult issues. Teachers could, however, be encouraged to breakdown the one hour into attention segments which could for example, constitute the all important teacher presentation, in which he/she presents principles and theories; guidance through working out of a model on chalkboard or OHP; free practice, where students work in pairs; feedback projected onto OHP and finally plenary discussion of the more salient points. This strategy would ensure the involvement of all the students in the learning experience as students learn more by doing than through passive listening.

Demonstration

Often, the best way to get one’s point across is to actually show or demonstrate how something ought to be done. This can be done as a demonstration per se, the ideal moment for team teaching or as a reinforcement or follow-up to a lecture. The greater the level of complexity of the subject matter, the more one will have to build the demonstration into the lecture. Use of the chalkboard or better still overhead projector is crucial here. This visual method will enable the large body of learners to actually watch as one demonstrates before they themselves are given an opportunity to practise the skill or process just demonstrated. This method is particularly suited to the teaching of skills in certain faculties in the sciences for example, law or medicine and in the teaching of skills such as bargaining and negotiating, interviewing, marketing, turn taking etc. and should be followed by discussion and feedback.

Discussion

The discussion method is an excellent means of covering the essential points of a session and meeting the objective of a particular lesson while allowing all the individuals in a group of 120 to raise issues. The method is highly participative and advantageous in that it pools the abilities and knowledge of a large class much to its advantage. Discussion can sometimes be woven into lec-
tures where students are allowed to interact with the person sitting next to them, in front of them or behind them (for variety). In a large class however, the leader must be careful that the discussion does not degenerate into a “free-for-all” by being very sensitive to the group and its dynamics and knowing when to guillotine it.

Case Studies

With this method, students can be presented with specific details of a problem, usually in written form and in subject groups, and in pairs or triads, asked to suggest the best solution they can, based upon the given facts. Interesting and varied solutions usually emerge and interesting comparisons can be made which can then be shared in a plenary session. In this session, each member of the group is called upon to present a particular aspect of their findings thus ensuring participation by all 60 class members. For maximum efficiency and assessment, study groups should be formalised.

Role Play

Role plays and simulations can be used to bring together knowledge and experience and to show their interrelationship through behavioral experimentation. Role plays are also a way of introducing and practising formulaic speech which can be used extensively in the teaching of aspects such as interviewing, giving reports, making presentations, conducting meetings, and in disciplines such as law, psychology, medicine. In a large class situation, role-plays and simulations are very adaptable to mixed ability groups as they provide practice opportunities for a taught skill in a ‘low risk’ environment. This strategy also makes it difficult for some class members to remain aloof and uninvolved.

Source Based Learning

With this method, students, as with case studies can be presented with similar or varying sources in written form or using some form of electronic media and in triads, asked to extract certain information relevant in the learning of a particular skill. This strategy could be used extensively in the teaching of skills such as summarising, paraphrasing, and synthesising. In large classes, source based learning offers the opportunity for students to work outside the teaching room. The feedback could be summarised for the benefit of all on the chalkboard or OHP or group wall charts with students being encouraged in the last segment of the lesson to walk round and discuss the various outcomes.
with a stationed group representative.

**Task Based Learning**

With this method, small groups of students would be presented with tasks to perform as a follow-up to teacher presentation. Task based strategies offer students in large classes the opportunity to gain hands-on experience as they practise skills that include memo/letter writing, situational dialogue, research in smaller groups which makes it possible to involve all the members of a large class. If the sitting arrangement does not permit group work, as is the case in university lecture theatres, then different tasks could be assigned to each row and learners informed that any member of the row would be required to give the answer.

**Assessment in Large Classes**

In large classes, and given the potential problems, what we assess as well as how we assess without being superficial becomes a relevant part of the discussion (Littlejohn, 1977). One would argue that teachers, especially those of large classes should no longer feel pressurised to produce a wide range of marks for the sake of keeping up-to-date and impressive records, which at best can be described as merely capturing a moment of the learner’s recent past and has no relation to the learner’s actual progress in learning the skills prescribed in any given syllabus or course outline (Takashima, 1993). The learners on their part, do need to be encouraged to kick the habit of writing to be ticked and corrected. One possible way round this would be to adopt a system of sample marking. This way, all the errors discussed on the chalkboard are selected from a cross section of the learner’s errors. This way too, all the things that get said when errors are being corrected, constitute potential intake for the whole class. This in a way substitutes conferencing. After the discussion, learners are then encouraged to refer back to their own written work to see if they can identify the same errors and if so correct them. This method would be in keeping with the more current view of making the learner responsible for his own learning as it helps to develop the learner’s criteria of correctness and appropriateness in any given task. At degree level, acquisition of the self correction skill is vital.

Other strategies of learner assessment with large classes include giving group assignments which are then assessed in peer feedback groups. For this to be more effective, evaluation instruments have to be designed for the students. Students could also be given shorter but well planned assignments. They could also be required to give only the outline of a paper instead of the whole.
In the marking of term papers, instructors could use a correction code for the common errors, the sign or number of which is written in the margin. This will reduce the time it takes to grade the papers.

To check on students' understanding, minute papers, answering summative questions such as, “What was the most important thing you learned today?” or “What questions remain?” could be answered by the student at the end of the session. Alternatively, after a lecture session, students could be asked to discuss a thought, what if, creative, mirror, or summary question with the person sitting next to them and have two or three students tell the response. Students could also be asked to give brief summaries of the lecture just attended. Yet another strategy of checking on learning would be to ask students to jot down the main points of the lesson and the teacher then presents his summary on OHP for self correction.

With large classes too, efforts have to be made to create the right mind-set of the group right from the onset so that students learn to appreciate early on, the purpose and value of the course as well as methods and strategies used as tools which help to maximise their chances of acquiring practical knowledge in combination with ability, the aim of teaching and learning as part of any degree programme. Right at the onset, the teacher needs to establish clear and stringent policies for things like; attendance, participation, turn taking, late assignments, and discipline. These strategies will work well if the teacher makes an effort to learn the students’ names.

Justification of Participatory Strategies in the Teaching of Communication Skills to Large Classes

The strategies briefly discussed above have one thing in common and that is encouraging participatory, experiential, and hands-on experience in a collaborative learning environment.

These broad strategies also work well with large classes across faculties for the following reasons:

♦ The learner’s presence as well as his/her experience is acknowledged

♦ Each learner’s experience adds to the richness of learning for the whole group

♦ The teacher is better able to tune into individuals in the group and to
recognise their unique problems

♦ Learner resistance and anonymity is broken down as they get more involved in the learning process
♦ The importance and value of feelings in the communication process is recognised
♦ The responsibility for grasping a skill and achieving solutions is left with the learner where it belongs and
♦ The learner ends up owning the skill that he gains through experience and not through telling.

Conclusion

It is clear from the discussion above that the teaching of Communication Skills as any other, in large classes, is indeed a challenge but one that is certainly not beyond the skillful, creative and imaginative practitioner. Large classes should not be allowed to become an obstacle to actual teaching and learning. One might suggest therefore that, while teachers of Communication Skills and indeed all other disciplines continue to try and find solutions to their more immediate problems in the teaching rooms, educational authorities should on their part be called upon to return to the drawing board and to re-examine this phenomenon of large classes and its multi-dimensional problems that has, in the name of expediency, been allowed to find its way into many teaching rooms across many universities.

References


Rowntree, D. *Assessing students: How shall we know them?* Harper and Row.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 License.

To view a copy of the license please see:
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/

This is a download from the BLDS Digital Library on OpenDocs
http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/