



The Perceptions and Experiences of English Teachers regarding Large EFL Classes

Satita Watanapokakul
Chulalongkorn University, Thailand
ajarmint@yahoo.com

Abstract

Large class sizes tend to be a standard feature nowadays of most ESL/EFL classes at the secondary and tertiary education levels in many countries, including Thailand. Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) too is affected by this phenomenon. To investigate (1) English teachers' perceptions of the optimal class size as well as the advantages and disadvantages of teaching large EFL classes and (2) English teachers' experience teaching large EFL classes, a set of questionnaires was distributed to 70 full-time Thai teachers who teach English courses offered by the institute for both undergraduate and graduate students. Moreover, ten of these instructors were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews to obtain more in-depth information. The data were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed and discussed.

Keywords: class size, large EFL classes, ELT, teachers' perceptions and experiences

1. Rationale

In the era of globalization, English is considered the lingua franca or international language. English is a compulsory subject in school curricula in most countries, including Thailand. Also, in Thai universities, English is taught in every faculty, and in international programs, English is used as the medium of instruction for all courses. With the importance of English nowadays, the number of students in an English class is continuously increasing. However, the number of teachers, classrooms, and instructional facilities remain limited, so class sizes have become larger. In developing countries like Thailand (Watson Todd, 2003; Wiriyachitra, 2002) as well as some major powerhouses such as the US (Kerr, 2011) and China (Wang & Zhang, 2011), teachers encounter class sizes that are difficult to manage and which hinder effective teaching and learning (Watson Todd, 2006). Although most would agree that smaller classes are more desirable for learning success (Averett & McLennan, 2006), the average number of students in university EFL classes, such as in Thailand, are clearly on the rise (Jimakon & Singhasiri, 2006). These increased student numbers pose many added challenges for teachers, which is an issue that has thus far gone largely unaddressed (Watson Todd, 2006).

To understand a large class, it is important to understand what qualifies as 'large'. Nolasco & Arthur (1988: 4) suggest that the answer can vary. A teacher who is used to groups of 12-14 students may find a group of 20 to be rather threatening. Others may be relieved to have merely 40 when used to teaching larger groups. According to Hess (2001), it depends on the mode of instruction and the subject being taught, as well as the support and other resources available like teaching assistants, graders, technology and facilities. Hayes (1997) also notes that there is no exact number of students which constitutes a large class. Watson Todd (2006) states that it depends upon factors such as teaching experience and perception, teaching and learning activities, course content, etc.

At Chulalongkorn University, Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) is responsible for developing the English language skills of students as well as providing instruction for other individuals including public officials, teachers and members of the public with an interest in improving their English skills. Most of the university freshmen, except those in the Faculty of Arts, enroll in the foundation English courses Experiential English I and II when they begin their undergraduate studies. Moreover, various faculties have requested that CULI develop and offer English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, which focus on the specific needs of the students in each faculty. Since it is acknowledged that large classes have distinct disadvantages for student-centered teaching, the courses offered by CULI are supposed to be limited to not more than 30 students per class. However, due to the continuously increasing number of undergraduates, class sizes regularly exceed that number. Currently, the class size limit is being reevaluated to determine whether a class size of 35-40 students is too large or not.

This study will investigate the perceptions and experiences of English teachers teaching EFL classes to determine an acceptable class size and explore the advantages and problems of teaching large EFL classes.

2. Research questions

This research aims to answer the following questions:

- 2.1 What are the English teachers' perceptions of
 - 2.1.1 the optimal class size and
 - 2.1.2 the advantages and problems of teaching a large EFL class?
- 2.2 What is the English teachers' experience with large EFL classes?

3. Research objectives

The research aims to:

- 3.1 investigate the English teachers' perceptions of
 - 3.1.1 the optimal class size and
 - 3.1.2 the advantages and problems of teaching a large EFL class.
- 3.2 investigate the English teachers' experience teaching large EFL classes.

4. Literature review

4.1 How large is a large class?

There is no exact quantitative answer for this question. There is only a relative answer based on the teachers' experience and perception (Ur, 1996), such as their familiarity with their usual class size and the content of a subject or skills (listening, speaking, writing or reading) taught (Ashman & Conway, 1993), and other variables such as the age of the students, the level of the students' studies, student motivation, the size of the room, and the equipment as well as facilities of the classroom (Watson Todd, 2006). To illustrate, a teacher who is accustomed to teaching classes of 20 students may feel that a class with 30 students is quite large. On the other hand, another teacher whose regular class size is 45 may consider the 30-student class small. Moreover, the content of a subject that a teacher teaches can also influence his/her perception of class size. A reading class with 50 students may be considered small while a speaking class with 50 students may be considered too large for one teacher to handle (LoCastro, 1989).



Watson Todd (2006: 2) researched the numbers of students mentioned in articles about large classes for English language teaching which is presented in Table 1. It clearly shows that the authors considered a large class to contain between 40 and 60 students.

Table 1: Minimum sizes of large classes

| Author (Year) | Minimum size of large class |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Barker (1976) | 55 |
| Long (1977) | 60 |
| Samuda & Bruton (1981) | 40 |
| Hubbard et al. (1983) | 45 |
| Chimombo (1986) | 50 |
| Dixon (1986) | 40 |
| Nolasco & Arthur (1986) | 40 |
| Finocchiaro (1989) | 65 |
| George (1991) | 60 |
| Safnil (1991) | 60 |
| Holliday (1996) | 50 |
| Hayes (1997) | 50 |
| Li (1998) | 50 |
| Touba (1999) | 60 |

4.2 The pros and cons of teaching in a large class

When asked about the problems of teaching a large class, most EFL teachers usually mention that they are unable to control/manage the classroom and it is rather difficult to have their students work individually. Similar concerns are shared by a number of scholars. For example, Kennedy & Kennedy (1996) note the difficulties of controlling a large class. Hayes (1997) states that large classes cannot provide students sufficient opportunity to communicate with each other. Harmer (2000) says that large classes cause problems for both teachers and students as they hinder the process of teaching and learning. Watson Todd (2006) synthesized the literature regarding the problems of large classes and categorized them into learning, management/activities, physical/practical features, affective factors, interaction, feedback and evaluation, and miscellaneous. One problem that the teacher faces in a large class is that students feel isolated and anonymous not only in relation to the teacher but also to one another (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2010: 173). This frequently makes them feel less personal responsibility for learning, have less motivation to learn, and attend class less often (Cooper & Robinson, 2000).

In addition to the disadvantages discussed, large classes do also have some advantages. Large classes can not only decrease instructor costs, but also make for

efficient use of faculty time and talent, availability of resources, and standardization of the learning experience (McLeod, 1998). In addition, at some universities such as Harvard it is considered an honor for the instructor to teach large classes (Atkinson, 2003).

Clearly, large classes do offer some advantages in addition to the disadvantages depending upon how it is looked at. In a research report entitled “*Is class size a problem?*,” Allwright (1989: 5-7) proposed four alternative viewpoints regarding large classes as follows:

1. Perhaps class size is really not a problem, just a convenient excuse.
2. Perhaps class size really is a problem, but not an interesting one for article writers or researchers.
3. Perhaps class size really is a problem, but it is seen generally as a hopeless one, insoluble except by elimination.
4. Perhaps class size really is a problem, but one that it is in fact dangerous ‘politically’ to solve ‘pedagogically’.

5. Research methodology

From the literature regarding the optimal number of students in a class as well as the pros and cons of a large class, this study involved survey research with the purposes of investigating the English teachers’ perceptions of the optimal class size and advantages and problems of teaching large EFL classes, and to investigate the English teachers’ experiences teaching large EFL classes.

5.1 Population and sampling

The population of the study included 70 full-time Thai teachers teaching English courses offered by Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) to both undergraduate and graduate students. The population served as the sample group of the study. In addition, 10 full-time Thai teachers were selected with a stratified purposive sampling technique as interviewees to obtain in-depth, meaningful information.

5.2 Research instruments

There were two main research instruments: A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

5.2.1 The Perception-Experience Questionnaire about Teaching Large English Classes was partially adapted from the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Project (Coleman, 1989) and was translated into Thai. This version was validated by three experts. The questionnaire (Appendix 1) has two parts. The first part is composed of eleven questions. Nine questions (questions 1-5, 7-8 and 10-11) are open-ended questions asking respondents to state the exact number of students in the largest and smallest classes they normally teach and the number of students in their typical class, as well as the point at which they begin to think of classes as being large. The questionnaire also asks respondents to state what they believe to be the ideal class size and to indicate the point at which problems begin because classes become unmanageably large or small. Questions 6 and 9 are multiple-choice questions asking respondents to identify to what degree they think large and small classes are problematic. The questions in the questionnaire can be categorized into two groups. Questions 1-3 are in regard to the respondents’ teaching experience with various class sizes. Questions 4-11 inquire about the respondents’ perception of class



size. The second part includes questions asking the respondents about the advantages and problems of teaching a large EFL class. Regarding problems with a large English class, there are twelve 4-point-Likert-scale questions followed by 2 open-ended questions. Regarding positive aspects of a large English class, there are six 4-point-Likert-scale questions followed by an open-ended question. Lastly an open-ended question asking the respondents to show any comments and /or suggestions regarding teaching English in a large class.

5.2.2 Semi-structured interview questions were employed for eliciting more in-depth analysis and confirmation of the teachers' experience and perceptions of large EFL classes. There were three main questions: problems and challenges in teaching large EFL classes, their experiences in teaching large EFL classes, and advantages of EFL classes.

The instruments were validated by three experts using the checklists, and the experts' responses were calculated by means of Item-Objective Congruence Index (IOC) (Turner & Carlson, 2003). Revisions were then made according to the experts' suggestions.

5.3 Research procedure

Seventy questionnaires were distributed to CULI teachers in June 2010, and were collected a week later. Only 41 'valid' questionnaires were returned and employed as data for further analysis. Next, 10 teachers were selected with a stratified purposive sampling technique to be interviewed to obtain the in-depth information. The responses from the interviews were tape-recorded.

6. Findings

The data from the questionnaires was quantitatively analyzed and is descriptively presented in the following table.

6.1 The findings from part one of the questionnaire

Part one of the questionnaire consists of thirteen questions asking the respondents about their perceptions and experience about class size as well as the advantages and disadvantages of large EFL classes. The responses to the first eleven questions are presented as follows:

Table 2: Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Class Size

| Opinions towards a specific class size | N | Minimum Size of the Class | Maximum Size of the Class | Mean of the Class Size | S.D. |
|--|----|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|--------|
| Q.1: The number of students in the usual class. | 41 | 25.00 | 35.00 | 32.12 | 3.119 |
| Q.2: The number of students in the largest class. | 41 | 32.00 | 78.00 | 42.02 | 11.892 |
| Q.3: The number of students in the smallest class. | 41 | 1.00 | 30.00 | 21.59 | 6.008 |

| Opinions towards a specific class size | N | Minimum Size of the Class | Maximum Size of the Class | Mean of the Class Size | S.D. |
|---|----|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|--------|
| Q.4: The number of students at which a class is considered large. | 41 | 17.00 | 60.00 | 31.15 | 8.424 |
| Q.5: The number of students in an ideal class. | 41 | 10.00 | 30.00 | 19.79 | 5.525 |
| Q.7: The number of students in a large class where problems begin. | 37 | 20.00 | 50.00 | 32.59 | 6.560 |
| Q.8: The number of students in a large class that is unmanageable. | 37 | 30.00 | 100.00 | 46.88 | 19.562 |
| Q.10: The number of students in a small class where problems begin. | 7 | 3.00 | 7.00 | 5.46 | 4.710 |
| Q.11: The number of students in a small class that is unmanageable. | 7 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.28 | 5.862 |

The data above shows the statistical minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation of each question (except questions 6 and 9). For ease of interpretation, it is possible to present the data in which respondents' experience of class size relates to their perception in terms of the actual numbers mentioned. The mean scores, hence, are presented in the following table:

Table 3: Relationships between Teaching Experience with Class Size and Perceptions of Class Size

| Teaching experience with class size | Mean (number of students in a class) | Perception of class size |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Q2: largest | 46.88 | 8*: large (unmanageable) |
| Q1: usual | 42.02 | 7*: large (problems begin) |
| Q3: smallest | 32.59 | Q4: being large |
| | 32.12 | Q5: ideal |
| | 31.15 | Q10**: small (problems begin) |
| | 21.59 | Q11**: small (unmanageable) |
| | 19.79 | |
| | 5.46 | |
| | 2.28 | |

Note: * N = 37, ** N = 7

According to Table 3, the average 'largest class size' normally taught by the respondents was around 42.02 students. This is slightly smaller than the mean figure of 46.88, which respondents gave as the point at which classes become unmanageable,



and it is larger than the figure of 32.59, which is the average of perceptions of the point at which problems begin because classes are large.

The average class size of respondents was 32.12 students. This is slightly below the size of the average largest class (42.02). Furthermore, the average usual class which these respondents teach is slightly higher than the average starting point at which the respondents begin to think of English classes as being large (31.15) but slightly smaller than the point at which they begin to experience problems (32.59). The respondents, thus, are very much accustomed to teaching their usual classes, which are close to being problematic because they are large. As a result, the average size of the usual class that the respondents teach is higher than the point at which the respondents begin to think of the classes as being large. This is very close to, or at, the point at which they begin to experience problems.

The average small class which the respondents teach is one of 21.59 students, whilst the average ideal class is 19.79. There were only seven teachers who considered small classes problematic. The average small class at which seven respondents began to experience problems was 5.46, and the average size of a class the respondents considered intolerably small was 2.28. That is to say, the respondents are generally teaching classes which are dramatically larger than their ideal class size, but—yet more striking—the class size which these respondents believe to be ideal is even smaller than the size of the smallest class which these teachers normally instruct.

In conclusion, the respondents are generally teaching classes which they consider 'large'. In addition, their usual classes are very much larger than what they consider to be ideal and indeed at the point at which they believe problems begin. Accordingly, large classes, as the respondents themselves define them, are well within their experience. In contrast, small classes, as the respondents define them, are not what they normally experience.

In question six, the respondents were asked to indicate whether teaching large English classes is either a big problem, a small problem, no problem at all, or 'other'. The data is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Frequency of Problems in Teaching Large EFL Classes

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------|
| A big problem | 17 | 41.5 |
| A small problem | 16 | 39.0 |
| No problem at all | 4 | 9.8 |
| other | 4 | 9.8 |
| Total | 41 | 100.0 |

Note: N = 41

The table shows that 41.5% of all respondents agreed that teaching large English classes was a big problem. 39.0% of the respondents considered those classes a small problem, while 9.8 percent of the respondents did not consider those classes problematic at all and 9.8% gave other comments. In other words, most of the respondents believed that teaching large English classes is a big problem, which is

considerably higher than the responses that indicate those classes were slightly problematic or unproblematic. In conclusion, 80.5% of all respondents considered teaching large classes problematic to a certain degree, while only a few respondents deemed these class sizes unproblematic.

In question nine, the respondents were asked to indicate whether teaching small English classes is a big problem, a small problem, or no problem at all. The data is presented in the following table.

Table 5: Frequency of Problems in Teaching Small EFL Classes

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------|
| A big problem | 1 | 2.4 |
| A small problem | 6 | 14.6 |
| No problem at all | 34 | 82.9 |
| Total | 41 | 100.0 |

Note: N = 41

Based on the data presented in Table 5, most of the teachers felt that teaching small English classes is not problematic. Only one respondent (2.4%) claimed that teaching a small English class was a big problem and 6 teachers (14.6%) claimed that teaching these classes was a small problem. It seems clear that teaching small English classes presents few problems in the respondents' opinion.

Question 12 asks the respondents about the problems of teaching-learning in a large EFL class. Their responses are summarized as follows:

- A large EFL class is a problem for both teachers and students depending on the skills / subjects being taught. For example, in a tutorial class or a reading class, the number of students in a class is not a big problem. However, for an effective communication class, class size does matter.
- Authentic assessment is a major issue in a large EFL class.
- Activity allotment in a large EFL class is a problem.
- Giving proper feedback to all students in a large EFL class is a problem.

Question 13 asks the respondents about the advantages of a large EFL class. Only two types of responses were made which were similar.

- A large EFL class is economical for the faculty or institute. One teacher can teach many students at one time. Therefore, the institute does not spend much money on facilities, electricity, or instructors.



6.2 The findings from part two of the questionnaire

The first section of part two of the questionnaire consists of 12 four-point Likert scale questions and 2 open-ended questions asking the respondents about problems in teaching a large EFL class. The frequency and percentage are presented as follows:

Table 6: Problems in Teaching Large EFL Classes

| Problems in Teaching Large EFL Classes | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Mean | S.D. |
|---|-------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|------|-------|
| 1. The teacher has to use lectures. | 5 (12.2%) | 16 (39%) | 15 (36.6%) | 5 (12.2%) | 2.49 | 17.06 |
| 2. The teacher can't catch the attention of the students at the back of the classroom, or sometimes the whole classroom ignores the teacher's teaching. | 2 (4.9%) | 14 (34.1%) | 15 (36.6%) | 10 (24.4%) | 2.81 | 19.21 |
| 3. The teacher can't check the student's attendance. | 21 (51.2%) | 13 (31.7%) | 3 (7.3%) | 4 (9.8%) | 1.76 | 7.26 |
| 4. The teacher can't provide a variety of activities for the students. | 1 (2.4%) | 14 (34.1%) | 19 (46.3%) | 7 (17.1%) | 2.78 | 22.87 |
| 5. The students don't participate in the teaching-learning. | 2 (4.9%) | 18 (43.9%) | 16 (39%) | 5 (12.2%) | 2.59 | 19.96 |
| 6. The students at the back of the class can't clearly see the content on the blackboard or can't clearly hear the teacher's instructions. | 1 (2.4%) | 15 (36.6%) | 20 (48.8%) | 5 (12.2%) | 2.71 | 24.64 |
| 7. The teacher can't allow the students to have an individual presentation. | 2 (4.9%) | 7 (17.1%) | 9 (22%) | 23 (56.1%) | 3.29 | 40.15 |
| 8. The teacher has to use more L1 (Thai). | 3 (7.3%) | 19 (46.3%) | 15 (36.6%) | 4 (9.8%) | 2.49 | 19.43 |
| 9. There is not a good rapport between the teacher and the students. | 1 (2.4%) | 10 (24.4%) | 20 (48.8%) | 10 (24.4%) | 2.95 | 25.43 |
| 10. The teacher can't remember the names of all students in the class and can't call on them to answer the questions in the class. | 1 (2.4%) | 8 (19.5%) | 15 (36.6%) | 17 (41.5%) | 3.17 | 29.89 |

| Problems in Teaching Large EFL Classes | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Mean | S.D. |
|--|-------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|------|-------|
| 11. The teacher can't finish correcting the students' assignments on time. | 2 (4.9%) | 11 (16.8%) | 14 (34.1%) | 14 (34.1%) | 2.98 | 23.57 |
| 12. The teacher can't provide comments or feedback to all of the students. | 3 (7.3%) | 8 (19.5%) | 17 (41.5%) | 13 (31.7%) | 2.97 | 24.83 |

As shown in Table 6, the responses from CULI teachers were mixed and fell somewhat in the middle of the scale. With only a few exceptions, the majority of the responses were equally split between 'Agree' and 'Disagree'. Nonetheless, most teachers felt that the problems associated with a large class lie in giving students opportunities to practice the language and providing timely and adequate feedback regarding their work.

Teachers elaborated on the problems they had teaching a large class in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. Responses included:

- could not assign individual work every time, nor provide substantial and timely feedback on every assignment due to a lack of time;
- could not tailor the class to meet the needs of every student;
- had trouble organizing classroom activities and sometimes were unable to draw students' attention;
- lectured more often than they would have liked in an English class and felt this lecture hindered students' opportunity to practice speaking;
- observed that students were less likely to speak up or to answer questions, which was particularly detrimental for students in speaking class;
- were not certain students understood their instruction;
- saw students drifting off in class and playing games on their smartphones;
- required more class time for students' group project presentation; and
- sometimes had trouble operating classroom A/V systems (e.g., computer problems), thus relying of lecture even more.

Most teachers expressed concerns about and outlined problems of teaching large classes and took certain measures to help alleviate the problems. Teachers said that they:

- encouraged group work with activities where students could break into groups and share the information they received with other group participants who received a different set of information;
- gave feedback to groups rather than individually while students were carrying out a task;
- used peer feedback or trained students to provide feedback to their peers;
- varied the type of activities to require more participation from the students and sometimes assigned group rather than individual assignments;
- assigned group presentations and allocated specific roles to each member in the group;
- lectured less and maximized opportunities to do group work;
- called on as many students as possible to answer questions;



- required students to meet outside class to discuss their writing assignments; and
- gave students specific assignments based on their individual weak points (e.g., grammar points or collocation) to work in a self-access learning center.

The second section of part two of the questionnaire consists of 6 four-point Likert scale questions and one open-ended question asking the teachers' opinion regarding the positive aspects of teaching a large English classroom. The frequency and percentage are presented as follows:

Table 7: Advantages of teaching Large EFL Classes

| <u>Advantages</u> of a Large English Classroom | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Mean | S.D. |
|--|-------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|------|-------|
| 1. The teacher can utilize a variety of classroom activities. | 9 (23.1%) | 24 (61.5%) | 5 (12.8%) | 4 (2.6%) | 2.15 | 17.61 |
| 2. The students enjoy class. | 3 (7.5%) | 27 (67.5%) | 9 (22.5%) | 1 (2.5%) | 2.15 | 24.04 |
| 3. The students can practice their English with their peers. | 6 (14.6%) | 25 (61%) | 8 (19.5%) | 2 (4.9%) | 2.15 | 20.33 |
| 4. The class size is appropriate for pair work and group work. | 6 (15%) | 18 (45%) | 13 (32.5%) | 4 (7.5%) | 2.37 | 15.88 |
| 5. The students can practice working with their classmates. | 3 (7.3%) | 11 (26.8%) | 23 (56.1%) | 4 (9.8%) | 2.68 | 28.78 |
| 6. The students can learn from their peers who have higher proficiency levels. | 5 (12.2%) | 10 (24.4%) | 23 (56.1%) | 3 (7.3%) | 2.56 | 28.99 |

In their responses in this section, teachers disagreed with most statements, suggesting that they perceived a large class somewhat negatively when it comes to activities and language practice. However, most teachers agreed that a large class did have some benefits, namely the opportunities for students to work in groups and learn from one another.

In the open-ended section, teachers also added their own perceived positive effects of a large class. They said that a large class:

- allowed the teacher to deliver some lessons which required a lengthy explanation (e.g., essay organization) more effectively;
- helped students learn to work in a team while respecting others' opinion;
- afforded teachers opportunities to observe students' language abilities as well as determine common mistakes;
- allowed weaker students to work in groups without being intimidated by more proficient ones who often dominated class;
- allowed weaker students who were afraid of asking the teacher questions to seek help from their peers;
- provided a good mix of students with different personalities and interests; and
- saved time and money;

6.3 Interview results

The researcher interviewed ten CULI teachers in order to better understand their perceptions of large classes and their experience teaching such classes. The researcher conducted one-to-one interviews with each teacher. The results presented below are thematically grouped.

6.3.1 Problems and challenges in teaching large EFL classes

Most teachers understood a large class was the norm nowadays given the fact that the number of university students enrolled rose steadily each year. However, teachers regarded this as an opportunity to try something different in their class. One teacher noted that she had tried ‘flipping’ the classroom by assigning half of the students to practice writing an essay in the self-access learning center at CULI while she taught the other half. When the students finished their assignment, they came back to the class to study essay organization. The other half went to the center to work on the assignment. With this, the teacher was able to teach a somewhat smaller number of students.

Teaching a large class was a challenge for all the teachers interviewed. This is particularly true for teachers who taught speaking classes. Some teachers noted that it was almost impossible to assess every student on a regular basis. Instead, teachers would opt for group presentations, knowing that their decision would reduce students’ opportunities to practice speaking.

In addition, every teacher stressed the importance of classroom facilities for effective large class teaching. As is often the case, teachers relied on A/V systems to aid teaching and keep on schedule. However, some teachers said they sometimes had to adjust the lesson plan on the spot simply because the A/V systems stopped working in the middle of the class without technical support staff on which they could rely. Furthermore, a large number of teachers wanted flexible classroom seating to allow students to form groups more easily.

6.3.2 Teachers’ experiences in teaching large EFL classes

The teacher’s level of experience teaching large classes is another topic repeatedly brought up by all teachers. Every teacher believed that teaching experience played the most important role in effective teaching. Most teachers felt a more experienced teacher would be better able to handle a large class than a novice one. In a large class, seasoned teachers would have a great deal of experience to draw upon when they dealt with students of different levels. One teacher who had just begun teaching noted that she had a rather difficult time teaching a large class because of mixed proficiency levels. When she set up a group activity, the teacher was not certain how to group students.

Another recurrent theme is that teachers should adjust their teaching approaches and techniques. Most teachers agreed that teachers needed to adapt in a large class. An electric approach can be very helpful. A teacher should mix many approaches of teaching to suit for the subject and the students. In an EFL class, it was impossible to lecture for two or three hours of class; thus, teachers needed to break a large class into small groups and engage students on a more personal level. Some teachers suggested a class cycle, alternating between whole-class lecture and small group work so that students could participate more actively in the class. Some teachers introduced active learning. Some mentioned technology, games (both classroom games and online games), e.g. Kahoot, and edutainment strategies. All of



the interviewees agreed the benefits of collaborative learning to be applied in a large EFL class.

There was also one consensus among the interviewees. All of them agreed that a teacher's perception of a large class individually varied. It depended on considerable factors such as their teaching experience, the topic being taught, the mode of instruction, etc.

6.3.3 Advantages of large EFL classes

It must be noted that not every large class has problems. A number of teachers felt a large class, as opposed to a small one, was more dynamic. One teacher had an experience teaching a class of five and she found out that students in that class preferred to work individually. For her, it was very difficult to vary the type of activities because students were reluctant to form a group. Without pair or group work, the teacher was unable to introduce a sense of competition into her classroom; students did not have the right amount of pressure to perform well in class. That lack of class dynamics, according to the teacher, meant that the class was less lively, and students were less enthusiastic.

For many teachers, the nature of language skills taught directly relates to the class size. A large writing class would be more problematic than a large speaking/listening class as teachers would need more time to prepare lessons that meet students' diverse needs while having more assignments to correct. For many teachers this would mean they could only give overall feedback rather than detailed, specific feedback for each individual student. On the other hand, a large speaking/listening class would enable teachers to organize different types of activities and take advantage of students with varying proficiency levels. A conclusion could be drawn from the interviews that "large classes are not always bad".

7. Discussion

The present study investigated the English teachers' perceptions of class size as well as advantages and disadvantages of teaching large EFL classes. Moreover, this study sought to investigate the English teachers' experiences with their teaching situation at the university.

The survey results show that whether or not a class is considered large depends on a number of factors. As for the CULI teachers involved in the study, a large class is not only about the number of students but also the target skill, as has been the case in previous studies (Hess, 2001). Certainly, there is a threshold beyond which a class is considered large. However, this should not constitute the sole definition of a 'large' class. For many teachers, a large speaking class would not contain the same number of students as a large writing class (Allwright, 1989; Hess, 2001). It is clear that teachers consider factors such as activities and assignments before they decide whether the class is too large. While teachers are more comfortable teaching a large speaking/listening class, they are much less in teaching a writing class. This is partly attributed to the fact that teachers require more time to give feedback regarding students' writing. In short, the definition of a large class varies from one context to another and from one language skill to another (Watson Todd, 2006).

A large class is not only a challenging environment for teaching but also a place where teachers experiment and sometimes innovate. Many teachers have responded to the challenges of teaching a large class by utilizing certain approaches and models such as compromising approaches (Coleman, 1989), Active Learning

(Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Fink, 2003; Watanapokakul, 2006), elements of blended learning (Chinokul, 2007), and collaborative and cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Hess, 2001; Greyling & Wentzel, 2007), and even lecture (Davis, 1993; Darasawang & Srimavin, 2006). However, there is no best single method or approach for teaching such classes thus far (Cronbach & Snow, 1977; Miller, Wilkes, & Cheetham, 1993; Marsh, 2012). Therefore, an eclectic approach utilizing principles and approaches from various theoretical perspectives has as an important role for teaching large EFL classes. For example, one teacher in this study flipped her class so that she could teach a smaller group while many other teachers repeatedly broke down larger classes into small groups throughout the class time to better engage students. These and similar teaching practices could lead to an improved teaching and learning environment for large groups. Also, some games and technology can be helpful in a large class. A teacher mentioned an online game creator named “Kahoot”. She employed her English games created by Kahoot in her large EFL classes, and her students really enjoyed the class.

Nonetheless, teachers cannot innovate without proper institutional support. All teachers involved in this study stressed that adequate and functioning classroom facilities needed to be in place; otherwise, it would be difficult to teach a large class. Classes can succeed or fail simply because of a lack of adequate facilities. More importantly, this institutional support goes beyond just facilities. It is evident from the survey results and interview data that novice teachers need guidance and support from more experienced teachers. Novice teachers often express concerns about class activities and student grouping, to name just a few. Without institutional support, these teachers would be left struggling with how to deal with large classes on their own. Such support could come in the form of lesson sharing, class observation, or co-teaching.

8. Suggestions for further studies

The aim of the present study is to investigate teachers’ perceptions of and experiences in large EFL classes. Although it provides several insights, it is clear that there is still much that can be done to obtain a better understanding of the nature of large classes and how teachers can best deal with them. It is hoped that this is an important step toward achieving that goal. In the further studies, both qualitative and quantitative research should be undertaken to examine students’ points of view and those of other stakeholders. Also, additional factors that may relate to the issue of class size and achievement should be investigated. Moreover, research into more comprehensive and consistent methods for teaching large EFL classes and assessing student achievement should be conducted taking into account the student perspective.

9. Significance and Usefulness of Research

The findings reveal teachers’ perceptions whether EFL classes taught by CULI are considered large and whether that makes them problematic or not. The overall findings of the study provide insights for managing EFL classes, as well as a basis for implementing the optimal teaching methods for large EFL classes and direction for further research on such classes.



About the Author

Satita Watanapokakul is currently an assistant professor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) in Bangkok, Thailand. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in English from the Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University, her Master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from Thammasat University, and her Ph.D. in English as an International Language from Chulalongkorn University. She was also granted a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship from Endeavour Scholarships and Fellowships in 2012 to conduct a research study at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australia. Her fields of interest are English language teaching (including active learning and creative methodology) and technology enhancing ELT.

References

- Allwright, D. (1989). *Is class size a problem?* Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project No. 3.
- Arias, J., & Walker, D. (2004). Additional evidence on the relationship between class size and student performance. *Journal of Economic Education*, 4(3), 311-329.
- Ashman, A., & Conway, R. (1993). *Using cognitive methods in the classroom*. London: Routledge.
- Atkinson, M. (2003). *Teaching large classes*. Retrieved from <http://www.brandonu.ca/Statusofwomen/TeachingLargeClassesnotes.doc>
- Averett, S. L. & McLennan, M. C. (2006). *Exploring the effect of class size on student achievement: What have we learned over the past two decades?* Retrieved from <http://www.webpages.urinus.edu/ecba/mcleannanresearch/Class%20size-achievement.pdf>.
- Barker, A. (1976). Instant English and related techniques. In Fanselow, J. F. & Crymes, R. H. (Eds.) *TESOL '76*, pp. 11-16. Washington, D. C.: TESOL.
- Bonwell, C. C. & Eison, J. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom*. ASHE-Eric Higher Education Report No. 1. Washington, Dc: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.
- Chimombo, M. (1986). Evaluating compositions with large classes. *ELT Journal* 40 (1) 20-26.
- Chinokul, S. (2007). *Teaching and Learning in Large classes: Obstacles and Challenges in Professional Teachers*. Retrieved from http://www.academic.chula.ac.th/thaiver/fac_develop/04km.html
- Coleman, H. (1989). *How large are large classes?* Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes (Research Project No. 4). Leeds, UK: Leeds University.
- Cooper, J. & Robinson, P. (2000). The argument for making large classes seem small. In MacGregor, J., Cooper, J., Smith, K. & Robinson, P. (Eds.), *Strategies for Energizing Large Classes: From Small Groups to Learning Communities*. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 81, (pp.5-16). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cronbach, L. J. & Snow, R. E. (1977). *Aptitudes and instructional methods*. New York: Irvington.
- Darasawang P. & Srimavin W. (2006). Using a lecture and tutorial approach in teaching large classes. *rEFLECTIONS*, 9(10), 41-49.
- Davis, B. G. (1993). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Dixon, D. (1986) Teaching composition to large classes. *Forum*, 24(3) 2-5, 10.

- Fink, L. D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences*. CA.: Jossey-bass.
- Finocchiaro, M. (1989). *English as a second/foreign language: From theory to practice*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- George, H. (1991). Helping teachers to cope with large classes. *ELT Journal*, 51 (2) 106-116.
- Gibbs, G., Lucas, L., & Simonite, V. (1996). Class size and student performance: 1984-94. *Studies in Higher Education*, 21, (3), 261-273.
- Hancock, T. M. (1996). Effects of class size on college student achievement. *College Student Journal*, 30, 479-481.
- Hayes, D. (1997). Helping teachers to cope with large classes. *ELT Journal*, 51(2) 106-116.
- Hess, N. (2001). *Teaching large multilevel classes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holiday, A. (1996). Large-and small-class cultures in Egyptian university classroom: A cultural justification for curriculum. In Coleman, H. (Ed.) (1996) *Society and the language classroom* (pp. 86-104). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hubbard, P. Jones, H., Thornton, B. & Wheeler, R. (1983). A training course for TEFL. Oxford: Oxford University Press. In MacGregor, J., Cooper, J., Smith, K. & Robinson, P. (Eds.), *Strategies for Energizing Large Classes: From Small Groups to Learning Communities* (pp. 5-16). New Directions for Teaching and Learning No. 81. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Arias, J J & Walker, D. M. (2004). Additional Evidence on the Relationship between Class Size and Student Performance. *The Journal of Economic Education*, 35(4), 311-329.
- Jimakon, P. & Singhasiri, W. (2006). Teachers' beliefs concerning large-class English teaching at the university level. *rEFLECTIONS*, 9(10), 13-23.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T. & Smith, K. A. (1991). Cooperative learning: Increasing college faculty instructional productivity. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 4*. Washington, D. C.: School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University.
- Kerr, A. (2011). *Teaching and learning in large classes at Ontario Universities: An exploratory study*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
- Kokkelenberg, E. C. & Dillon, M. & Christy, S. M. (2008). The effects of class size on student grades at a public university. *Economics of Education Review*, 27(2), 221-233.
- Li, D. (1998). "It's always more difficult than you plan and imagine": Teachers' perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach in South Korea. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(4), 691-692.
- LoCastro, V. (1989). Large size class: The situation in Japan. *Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes (Research Project No. 5.)* Leeds, UK: Leeds University.
- Long, M. H. (1977). The problem of large classes. *Forum*, 15(1), 40-42.
- Marsh, D. (2012). *Blended learning: Creating learning opportunities for language learners*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- McLeod, N. (1989). What teachers cannot do in large classes? *Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes (Research Project No. 7.)* Leeds, UK: Leeds University.
- Mgeni, E. M. (2013). Teacher perceptions on effective teaching methods for large classes. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 3(2), 114-118.



- Michaelsen, L. K. (2004). Team-based learning in large classes. In L. K. Michaelsen, A. B. Knight, and L. D. Fink (eds.), *Team-based learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching* (pp. 153-167). V.A.: Stylus Publishing.
- Miller, J. E., Wilkes, J. M. & Cheetham, R. D. (1993). Tradeoffs in student satisfaction: Is the “perfect” course an illusion? *Journal on Excellent in College Teaching*, 4, 27-47.
- Nolasco, R., and Arthur, L. (1986). You try doing it with a class of forty! In Rossner, R. & Bolitho, R. (Eds.), *Currents of change in English language teaching*, (pp. 188-195). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nolasco, R., and Arthur, L. (1988). *Large classes (Essential language teaching series)*. London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Onwu, G. & Stoffels, N. (2005). Instructional functions in large, under-resourced science classes: Perspectives of South African teachers. *Perspectives in education*, 23(3), September 2005.
- Onwu, G. (1999). Inquiring into the concept of large classes: emerging typologies in an african context. In Savage M & Naidoo P (Eds.), *Using the local resource base to teach science and technology: Lesson from Africa*. AFCLIST.
- Safnil (1991). Techniques for dealing with large English classes. *Guidelines*, 13(1), 82-86.
- Samuda, V. & Bruton, A. (1981). Tango-seated pairs in the large classroom. *Forum*, 19(1), 22-25.
- Svinicki, M. & McKeachie, W. (2010). *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research and Theory for College And University Teachers* (13rd Edition). Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning Inc.
- Teaching and Educational Development Institute. (2002). *Teaching large classes*. Retrieved from <http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/largeclasses/>
- Toth, L., & Montagna, L. (2002). Class size and achievement in higher education: A summary of current research. *College Student Journal*, 36(2), 253-261.
- Touba, N. A. (1999). Large classes using groups and content. *Forum*, 37(3), 18-22.
- Watson Todd, R. (2006). Why investigate large classes? *rEFLECTIONS*, 9(10), 1-12.
- Turner, R. C., & Carlson, L. (2003). Indices of item-objective congruence for multidimensional items. *International Journal of Testing* 3 (2) 163-171.



Appendix 1

This questionnaire is part of the research entitled “The Perception and Experience of CULI Teachers on Large EFL Classes.” The answers will be kept confidential.

Part I

Instructions: Answer the following questions and follow the specific instructions (if any) for each question.

1. On average, how many students are there in your English class? Please provide an exact number (e.g., 45 students), not range (e.g., 40-50).

Answer: _____

2. Of all the English classes you have taught, what is the largest class size you have had? Please specify the number.

Answer: _____

3. Of all the English classes you have taught, what is the smallest class size you have had? Please specify the number.

Answer: _____

4. For you, please specify the number of students at which a class is considered large.

Answer: _____

5. For you, what is the ideal number of students in an English class?

Answer: _____

6. Is teaching a large class a problem for you?

Yes, definitely.

Yes, somewhat.

No.

Others. Please specify: _____

7. In a large English class, at what number of students do you begin to experience problems with your teaching? Please specify the number.

Answer: _____

8. In a large English class, at what number of students do you feel you are unable to teach effectively? Please specify the number.

Answer: _____

9. Is teaching a small class a problem for you?

Yes, very much.

Yes, somewhat.

No. (Please move to Part 2.)



10. In a small English class, at what number of students do you begin to experience problems with your teaching? Please specify the number.

Answer: _____

11. In a small English class, at what number of students are you unable to effectively conduct a class? Please specify the number.

Answer: _____

Part 2

Instructions: For each statement, please rate how much you agree with the statement by checking (✓) the box that best matches your answer. Please feel free to add any comments you have in the space provided.

2.1 Problems with a large English class

| Problems | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|-------|----------------|
| 1. The teacher has to use lectures. | | | | |
| 2. The teacher can't catch the attention of the students at the back of the classroom, or sometimes the whole classroom ignores the teacher's teaching. | | | | |
| 3. The teacher can't check the student's attendance. | | | | |
| 4. The teacher can't provide a variety of activities for the students. | | | | |
| 5. The students don't participate in the teaching-learning. | | | | |
| 6. The students at the back of the class can't clearly see the content on the blackboard or can't clearly hear the teacher's instructions. | | | | |
| 7. The teacher can't allow the students to have an individual presentation. | | | | |
| 8. The teacher has to use more L1 (Thai). | | | | |



| Problems | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|-------|----------------|
| 9. There is not a good rapport between the teacher and the students. | | | | |
| 10. The teacher can't remember the names of all students in the class and can't call on them to answer the questions in the class. | | | | |
| 11. The teacher can't finish correcting the students' assignments on time. | | | | |
| 12. The teacher can't provide comments or feedback to all of the students. | | | | |

13. Any other problems (please specify)

- 13.1 _____
13.2 _____
13.3 _____
13.4 _____
13.5 _____

14. How did you solve the problems mentioned in 13?

- 14.1 _____
14.2 _____
14.3 _____
14.4 _____
14.5 _____

2.2 Positive aspects of a large English class

| Advantages | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|-------|----------------|
| 1. The teacher can utilize a variety of classroom activities. | | | | |
| 2. The students enjoy class. | | | | |
| 3. The students can practice their English with their peers. | | | | |
| 4. The class size is appropriate for pair work and group work. | | | | |



| Advantages | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|-------|----------------|
| 5. The students can practice working with their classmates. | | | | |
| 6. The students can learn from their peers who have higher proficiency levels. | | | | |

7. Other advantages (please specify)

- 7.1 _____
- 7.2 _____
- 7.3 _____
- 7.4 _____
- 7.5 _____

2.3 Please provide any comments and/or suggestions regarding teaching English in a large class.

End of the questionnaire