

Record of discussion at: <http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2011/sessions/2011-04-16/investigating-large-classes-are-we-making-progress-panel-discussion> (downloaded 15.9.13)

In relation to IATEFL Conference Symposium on 'Investigating large classes: are we making progress?', Brighton, 2011.

Submitted by Richard_Smith on Wed, 2011-04-20 05:16. -

Participants who provided input during the hour were (in this order) Nigussie Negash (Ethiopia), Richard Smith (UK), Mais Ajjan (Syria), Mehvish Saleem (Pakistan), Zakia Sarwar (Pakistan), Valeria Franca (Brazil) and Hywel Coleman (UK/Indonesia).

Prem Phyak (Nepal) and Wang Qiang (China) also provided notes to be shared (these are uploaded above, together with Zakia Sarwar's full handout, a session overview, and information about the TELC network).

Two further resources referred to during the session are:

1) Shamim, F., Negash, N., Chuku, C. and Demewoz, N. 2007. Maximising Learning in Large Classes: Issues and Options. Addis Abbaba: The British Council. Available online: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/ELT-16-screen.pdf>

[referred to near the beginning - we are hoping that, if you use this, you could give us feedback]

2) A bibliography (2002+) of research into large classes / difficult circumstances:
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/groups/ellta/apt/thematic_...

Please feel free to post any comments, suggestions or questions you may have about the session and the issues it raises - we welcome feedback!

And do visit the Teaching English in Large Classes (TELC) website (www.warwick.ac.uk/go/telc) if you would like further information about ongoing work.

Submitted by Mehvish Saleem on Fri, 2011-04-22 06:32.



Member since:

22 April 2011

Last activity:

2 years 20 weeks

Hi Richard

I think the experiences shared by other panellists were quite interesting in terms of how issues of teaching English in large class are addressed in varied class context.

The fruitful talk about good practices and strategies of teaching in large class is something that the teachers can make use of. Also, how practitioner research can highlight issues that the teachers come across and ways in which they implement new strategies in their own context (like in my case).

It would be great to read some more teacher stories and learn about the different approaches used in teaching English in different contexts.

Submitted by Richard_Smith (not verified) on Fri, 2011-04-22 11:20.

Mehvish, I agree we should keep on sharing experiences. There was only a short time for each presenter, unfortunately, and we didn't get a chance to talk together much or with the audience during the panel discussion.

So I hope you don't mind if I ask you a few questions about your own action research project (which you reported on from 34.30 on the video) - in fact, one of the audience participants asked where she could read more about your project, so this might be a good way to respond.

As you mentioned, you carried out your practitioner research over a period of 12 lessons in a private university in Karachi, with what you called six 'cycles'. I guess this means that you changed your views/ideas/practices after two lessons each time - could you say a bit more about how your practice developed? What were some of the challenges in getting students involved in group work, and what did you actually ask them to do in their groups, and how well did the different ideas work?

Also, what kind of ideas did students come up with themselves, towards the end (you mentioned that they had some good ideas)?

I'm also interested in what you were saying about your focus being on learning objectives and evaluation as well as group work and associated tasks - how did your ideas and practice change in this respect?

Lots of questions, I know - but it'd be great if you could share some more about what you did - practitioner research is really something we want to promote in the TELC network, thinking that teachers themselves are those who can have / can develop the best ideas!!

Submitted by Mehvish Saleem (not verified) on Fri, 2011-04-29 11:14.

Hi,

Thank you for taking interest and giving me yet another chance to share my action research project on this forum. Let me try and answer your questions in separate posts.

1. A brief background to the project - this project was carried out over a period of 12 lessons (which included the pre-intervention, intervention and post-intervention phases) in a private university in Karachi, Pakistan. As part of my initial investigation, I observed three lessons to learn how teaching/learning takes place in this classroom. I then planned the intervention phase which was based on six cycles. For each cycle, I developed one lesson plan except for the third cycle which I also termed as the 'third unit' because it was further divided into three stages comprising of one lesson each. So, I developed eight lesson plans in six cycles and each cycle was developed on the basis of the observations, reflections and students feedback from the previous cycle. In the final lesson, I asked students to reflect upon their experience of these eight lessons. Later, I also spoke to the course instructor about his perceptions of the use of group work technique in his class as he was also my critical friend during the intervention phase.

Submitted by Mehvish Saleem (not verified) on Fri, 2011-04-29 11:16.

2. Some challenges in getting students involved in group work

I would say that the biggest challenge was to involve students in this project since I was a researcher (entering the site for only 12 lessons). Since I had taught in the same university some time back, I had some

idea of the teaching/learning practices, but also the initial investigation phase further established the fact that even in a course like communication skills, lectures were carried out in a very traditional way and students had limited opportunities to practice their skills. Students were quite tuned into their traditional passive role as a listener in the classroom and that was yet another challenge for me. When I carried out my first cycle (where I introduced to them the idea of working in groups), it took me almost the entire lesson to encourage them to participate in the group discussion. Also, it was highly challenging to ensure heterogeneous group formation as in some cases, the painfully shy group would struggle to initiate and lead the classroom activities. Then it is again very challenging to ensure student's involvement in the group task as the teacher can only monitor one or two groups at a time.

Submitted by Mehvish Saleem (not verified) on Fri, 2011-04-29 11:17.

3. The nature of group tasks

Since I had only 8 lessons to carry out my action plan, I focused on the productive skills (speaking & writing). Each lesson or group task was then planned to promote learning through practically developing students productive skills. For example, speaking lessons aimed at group & class discussions that emphasized on tasks based on conflict resolution, problem solving, critical thinking, and oral fluency. Writing lessons focused on group discussion leading to an individual writing task (argumentative essay writing). Later, the groups were also involved in peer editing and feedback to strengthen their sense of both individual and group achievement. Groups were also involved in creative thinking and story writing.

4. How well did different ideas worked?

I think the idea of using different speaking and writing activities and also the different group formation in each lesson was a positive step towards building student's interest in working in groups. The speaking activities carried out at two levels (i.e. the group and whole class discussion) worked really well as students felt more confident in sharing ideas within their groups first and then developing it in a whole class discussion. However, I realized that time management and precision didn't really work well in one of the lessons as sometimes students demanded more time for group discussions.

Submitted by Mehvish Saleem (not verified) on Fri, 2011-04-29 11:19.

5. What kind of ideas did students come up with themselves, towards the end (you mentioned that they had some good ideas)?

During the post intervention phase students were asked to write one page about their overall experience of the use of group work technique over a period of 8 lessons. The suggestion they made included the need to schedule a two hour class instead of one hour for communication skills course as it would give them more time to participate in the activities. They also mentioned that since their basic interest is in engineering, it would help them further if the discussion topics were subject specific. So they came up with interesting topics for speaking lessons. Some students also suggested that they should get a chance to go around the class and listen to other groups' discussion or if it is a written task then it should be posted in the class so that later the class can read every group's work and give feedback. They also proposed that speaking evaluation should to be done in group discussion rather than in front of the class, structured presentations as it didn't really make them practice anything but memorizing presentation content.

Submitted by Mehvish Saleem (not verified) on Fri, 2011-04-29 11:25.

6. My focus on learning objectives and evaluation as well as group work and associated tasks - how did my ideas and practice change in this respect?

One positive aspect of doing practitioner research is this classroom was that I spent more time and made conscious effort to plan each lesson keeping in mind the learning outcomes. For each lesson, I rationalized the aims of that particular cycle and focused on what students would learn by the end of the lesson. For example, one of the lessons aimed to promote developmental discussion to motivate learners to participate in problem solving. The learning outcomes specifically focused on developing problem solving skills in groups, collaborative learning, and confidently expressing views giving possible solutions to the problem. Every lesson was planned keeping in view the task (which promoted group work and either of the productive skills) and the intended outcomes for the learners.

Since large classroom is a 'harsh reality' in Pakistan (in fact in the developing countries), I think practitioner research has a lot to offer to the teachers in different contexts. I have certainly gained better understanding of how I can use the action research cycles to address large class teaching issues and improve the quality of teaching/learning in my classrooms. I completely agree with your idea

that teacher research can best inform their own practices. I really hope to hear from more teachers how practitioner research works in their context.

I hope I have answered all your questions. Please feel free to post any comments, suggestions, feedback or questions.

Mehvish Saleem

Submitted by Maha Hassan (not verified) on Sat, 2011-04-23 00:17.

Hi everybody,

I've really enjoyed your session online from Egypt. Although I have been teaching English for almost 22 years, yet, I enjoyed learning more about the different educational systems around the world. Yet I think if you had been given more time you would have had a better chance to tell us about the solutions that most of them came up with. It would have been more enriching. Anyway, it has been a great pleasure writing to you. Thank you for the enriching seminar!!!

Mrs. Maha Hassan
Egypt

Submitted by fauzia.shamim (not verified) on Wed, 2011-04-27 18:14.

Hi Everyone,

I was unable to reach the IATEFL conference on time due to a sand storm in Madinah in Saudi Arabia (Yes, that's where I' am these days!) and therefore missed this session- however, it's great to have this opportunity to catch up with everyone online!

Wang, It was great to read your paper about research on large classes in China-I didn't realize so much had been written about large class teaching in China- wonder if the articles referred to in your paper can be made available in some way- possibly through links on the TELC Network page on the University of Warwick web site.

Mevish, your presentation based on your research (as a teacher-researcher) reminds ME of a recent course I conducted in Karachi, Pakistan on 'Teaching and researching in large classes' from the platform of SPELT (Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers). The course was planned (and conducted) in three phases: In the first phase we met face-to-face for 10 days to explore issues in large class teaching and ways of addressing them- for example, we shared and discussed strategies for managing large classes, a problem noted by all the participants (and earlier by several researchers in the Lancaster-

Leeds language learning in Large Classes Project). During this phase the participants were encouraged (and helped) to identify topics for action research. The idea was that the participating teachers would go back to their schools and conduct action research on the identified topics for a term at least. However, despite the enthusiasm shown by the participants in the first phase and the very positive feedback we received in regard to their learning in this phase of the course, only 5 participants , out of a total of 12 in the first phase, registered for the second part of the course (comprising phases 2 and 3) which focused on teachers' action research.

The second phase comprised fortnightly meetings to share ideas, discuss issues in conducting research and help each other in a collaborative and congenial environment as a community of practice. However, soon two teachers dropped out of the course as they found the idea of teacher-research 'unpalatable'. The other three reported many problems in conducting action research, such as pressure to complete the syllabus, limited time and resources for systematic data collection in their classrooms and inadequate research knowledge. A workshop and several readings were given to the participating teachers to help them understand the concept of action research and develop the appropriate skills and tools for the same. Interestingly, despite the fact that at least two of the three participants were sponsored by their school to attend the course, the teachers reported that the school administration was unable to understand the relevance of their action research to either their own or other teachers' professional development in the school. This further discouraged them from spending the required personal time and effort to document their practice and engage in ongoing (and systematic) data collection and analysis or even critical reflection on the strategies being used by them in their large classes. Also, all the 3 participants reported that it was difficult to focus in their action research on large classes only as according to them, so many things were happening in their classes which they could not afford to ignore- and they found it difficult to record these 'happenings' on a regular basis- a requirement of action research. Anyways, to cut a long story short, only one teacher was able to complete her action research project.

This 'story' makes me wonder if action research (or practitioner research that is not being undertaken as part of a certificate or degree course as was the case with Mehvish) is a viable option for teachers working in under resourced and difficult circumstances.

I would love to hear from other teachers and teacher educators about their experiences of FACILITATING ACTION RESEARCH IN DEVELOPING AND TRANSITIONAL COUNTRIES.

Fauzia

Submitted by **hkuchah** on Wed, 2011-05-11 19:20.



Member since:

2 April 2009

Last activity:

2 years 18 weeks

Thank you Richard, for sharing this session with (I hope) a wider audience. I feel very enriched with Mehvish's research and do hope more practitioners could do same in their classes. Unfortunately mainstream primary and secondary level teachers in developing countries are very often overburdened with system demands that they can hardly involve in any form of conscious classroom research in the same way their university counterparts will.

One thing we have been able to do within the Cameroon ELT association (CAMELTA) is to encourage teachers to share stories of their successes. Last year and this year, the theme of the annual conference was/is: 'Achieving Quality ELT in Difficult Circumstances: Experiences and Successes of Teachers in Practice' and the result, so far has been that teachers are seeing more value in their practice than pedagogic authorities would admit.

My current research about what pupils and teachers think about appropriate ways of teaching in two different parts of Cameroon reveals that these teachers (and their learners) possess shared, but also - in some respects - divergent notions of appropriate pedagogy which are largely different from Ministry of Education policies, and it is these notions (not what the Ministry says) that have the biggest impact on their practices.

Richard provided a very concise summary of my study in the presentation. Thanks Richard. A further summary of my research procedure can be found via: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/researchdegrees/students/harry_kuchah/

Harry

- See more at: <http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2011/sessions/2011-04-16/investigating-large-classes-are-we-making-progress-panel-discussion#sthash.J7Zrkwbq.dpuf>