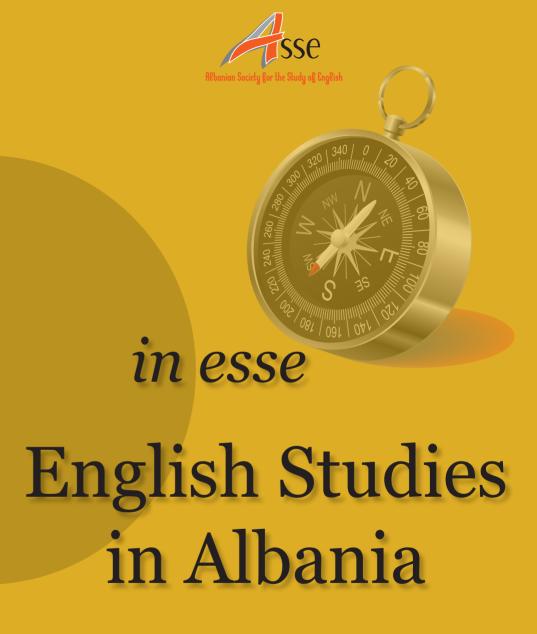
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Challenges and Coping Strategies in Teaching English to Large Classes: The Case of Non-English-Speaking Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study is to examine the challenges and coping strategies in teaching English to large classes. The participants are English lecturers in a public university in Indonesia. The research method used is Observations were carried out and interviews were conducted to demonstrate if and how thermal discomfort and tiredness, classroom learning distractions, inadequate timing, class control difficulties, inability to give individual student attention, difficulty in keeping up students' engagement in the lesson and in assessing their learning progress affected the teaching and learning processes in large classes despite using portable cooling devices, implementing a U-shaped seating arrangement, assigning teamwork, practising peer tutoring and repetition, or friendly questioning among the lecturers' strategies to deal with these challenges. These findings imply that large classes might deteriorate the quality of English teaching. Therefore, several implications could be made such as class size reduction or hiring more lecturers. When these are not feasible, other appropriate strategies must be employed to cope with these challenges.

Keywords: challenges, coping strategies, large class, lecturers' strategy, lecturers' perception

Introduction

N INDONESIA, the use of English has spread in a wide range of fields such as economics and business, science and technology, communication and entertainment, education and culture. It is also required for work because many companies introduce English among the criteria for employment. Realizing the importance of English for the country's development, especially in building human resources, English is taught as a compulsory subject to students in secondary and higher education.

In English language teaching, classroom management appears to be important, especially when teaching large classes. Managing large classes is an important issue in most educational institutions, mainly in developing countries like Indonesia. Several studies have reported a number of challenges in teaching English to large classes. Most of these challenges are associated with individual attention, class discipline, teaching methods and techniques, and teacher-student relationship (Hayes 1997). Large classes tend to present difficulties for teachers in providing attention, getting responses, controlling discipline, ensuring learning effectiveness, engaging students in the lesson, and motivating them to use English instead of the local language (Hayes 1997; Hadi and Arante 2015). As such, large classes are likely to affect the quality of English language teaching.

In non-English speaking higher education, the issue of teaching large classes has become a crucial concern. For instance, in most universities in Indonesia, a lecturer often has to teach English to a relatively large class of more than thirty students (Kusni 2013). Although the definition of a large class still varies (Wright 2005), this number is really not ideal for effective language teaching and learning. Large class size commonly presents real challenges for the lecturers to cope with. Many studies on this issue have been conducted in primary and secondary schools across the country, but not so much has been done at the university level. Therefore, this study is directed to examine the challenges of teaching English to large classes in one public university in Indonesia and how lecturers cope with these challenges.

Literature review

Classroom management refers to a variety of skills or strategies teachers use to organize, maintain, and control a classroom learning environment. Brown (2001) claims that classroom management is an essential aspect of a successful teaching and learning process. It embraces plenty of factors consisting of how a teacher physically arranges the classroom to create classroom energy. Classroom management also applies to teachers' techniques for organizing the physical design of a classroom, establishing rules and routines, developing relationships, implementing effective instruction, and addressing discipline issues (Garret 2014). Effective classroom management provides students with frequent, meaningful, and monitored interactions and activities during instructional time. The process of teaching and learning may not run well if the teacher is unable to manage the class.

There is no consensus on a clear definition of a large class or on the precise number of students for a large class. The class size is still arguable since the definition of a large class is subject to perceptions that vary from context to context (Hayes 1997, 115), across disciplines, educational systems and levels, and the like. In a 2015 UNESCO publication, a guide for teachers to help them deal with large classes, despite the fact that there is no exact class size that should count as large, it is added that a large class "is measured in terms of the number of students per teacher (student-teacher ratio)", for example, 25-30 students per one teacher is considered large in some countries. Hadi and Arante (2015, 1) specify that, in language teaching, a class of more than twenty students is considered large. Brown (2001) emphasizes that, for language learning, a class should have not more than twelve students. This is the ideal number of students in a classroom to give students the opportunity for active participation and interaction, which are crucial for successful learning.

Teachers tend to face more challenges in teaching large classes. Hayes (1997, 108-110) mentions several problems related to teaching large classes; discomfort because of physical restraints, class discipline,

neglect of students' individual needs, assessment problems, and learning efficiency. Brown (2001) adds that large classes present several challenges for teachers such as widely varied students' proficiency and ability, minimized teacher-student attention, reduced chance to speak, and limited teacher feedback on the lesson. Large classes miss communication as it is rather difficult for both the teacher and the students to establish close contact (Rohin 2013, 6). Furthermore, Harmer (as qtd. in Ara and Hossain 2016, 295) states that large classes generally bring difficulty in organizing all of the activities in the teaching and learning processes. It is difficult for the teacher to interact with the students at the back, to ask for and receive personal attention, and to have students moving around or changing pairs. To sum up, large classes are difficult to manage and might constrain classroom interaction and activities, which are crucial for successful teaching and learning (Aoumeur 2017).

In this study, we see what challenges higher education lecturers face when teaching English to large classes and how they cope with them, what strategies they employ to overcome them.

The methodology of the study

For this study, qualitative research methods were used to investigate the challenges of teaching English to large classes and how lecturers cope with these challenges. The participants of this study were three lecturers from the English Department, Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah, Indonesia. They were purposively selected as they taught large classes, could be reached out, and were willing to participate in this research.

Interviews and direct classroom observations with note-taking were employed to collect research data. Note-taking during observations was necessary to sustain the data from the interviews. Observation checklists were used to obtain information about teachers' activities in the classroom. We made more than ten class observations for each lecturer in the course of one semester. We carried out face-to-face interviews with research participants after the observations. Most interviews lasted about 45 to 60 minutes.

Next, we first organized the data and prepared for data analysis. This involved transcribing interviews, scanning materials, typing descriptive notes, and arranging the data into different types. Second, we read through all the data and made relevant annotations or recordings about the data. Third, we began the detailed analysis by coding the results from the checklist descriptive notes and the interview data. Fourth, we used coding to generate descriptions of the setting(s) as well as of the categories or themes for analysis. In this step, we described the detailed information obtained from the observations and interviews and generated codes for the descriptions. Last, we interpreted the data.

We analyzed the challenges in teaching English to large classes by creating a comparison table of the themes by providing a list of codes. We made use of the descriptive notes, checklists, and verbatim transcribed videotaped recordings during the observation processes. We described and explained the results obtained from the data analysis. Finally, we interpreted the research findings identifying the challenges in teaching English to large classes in higher education.

Trustworthiness in this study was established by triangulating the research data. Triangulation was used to validate findings or determine the accuracy and credibility of the findings (Creswell 2012, 259). We used a variety of data sources to ensure that the findings and interpretations were accurate and credible. We checked, combined, and compared the research data from multiple classroom observations and interview data. All the data were corroborated, and thus the findings were judged to be accurate and credible.

Data analysis

Our research findings are based on the research questions with their specific themes. First, we present the findings related to the lecturers' challenges in teaching large classes. Second, we present the findings on the lecturers' strategies to cope with these challenges.

We found out that there were several challenges encountered by the lecturers in teaching English to large classes. The themes and codes obtained from the thematic analysis are described in table 1 below:

No	Themes	Codes
1.	Thermal	Too many students and chairs in the
	discomfort and	rooms
	tiresome	High classroom temperatures
		Inadequate classroom ventilation
		Unmaintained air conditioner (AC)
		No fans installed in the classrooms
		Sweating and tiring in teaching
2.	Hard to control	Inability to match names to faces
	the class	Hard to quiet noise in the room
		Hard to control students' behavior and
		actions
		Have to speak in a loud voice
3.	Inability to give	Inadequate time for individual attention
	individual	Hard to stay moving around students'
	attention	space
		Classroom learning distractions
4.	Difficult to keep	Difficult to get students' attention
	students'	Most students were passive in learning
	engagement	Students' less understanding
5.	Hard to assess	Insufficient space for distance during
	student's learning	exam
	progress	Hard to have effective exam supervision
		Inability to score and provide feedback

Table 1. Challenges faced by the lecturers teaching large classes.

A comfortable classroom environment is very important for the teaching and learning processes. Lecturers and students need comfort without any distraction from inside or outside the classroom. In this study, the first challenge encountered by the lecturers in teaching large classes was feeling discomfort. Our observations showed that the number of students in each class was around 30 to 40. Actually, each classroom had two windows and air ventilation above the door for thermal comfort. However, in hot weather, thermal conditions were very poor with so many students and chairs in the room. The results of

the interviews confirmed that lecturers felt discomfort in teaching. One of the lecturers, (RM) complained that,

"I have to be in the classroom for more than two hours in every teaching session... It is very hot in the room with so many students without good air conditioners or ceiling fans installed in the classroom. Actually, I feel so uncomfortable, sweating and getting tired easily in teaching, especially in hot weather. So, I ask the students to bring their small portable fans to keep them cool during hot weather."

Observation data indicated that lecturers encountered some challenges in controlling students in large classes. It was hard for them to recognize the names and characteristics of their students. They also had difficulty monitoring students' behaviour. Movements were not clearly visible from the front of the classroom. They could not get closer and provide individual attention to students sitting in the back rows of the classroom. When lecturers gave their students a quiz as an individual assignment, they collaborated with their friends instead. So, lecturers generally organized their classroom by grouping and seating their students in pairs or small groups of three to five for various class activities. Additionally, the results from the interviews showed that lecturers had difficulties in controlling large classes. One lecturer (RM) affirmed that,

"During the lesson, it is hard for me [to] observe students at the back rows. I hardly move around the class to control the students' activities and check their works from one student to another in this crowded classroom... U-shaped seating arrangement is really helpful for me to move around the class."

Other lecturers (DD) and (MM) added that,

"To control the students, I always speak loudly and powerfully in explaining the materials and giving instructions to have students listen to me and follow my instructions." "When I provide instruction or concepts, some of the students do not get my messages correctly. For example, the

students did not do what they were supposed to do because they misunderstood the directions on how to complete their tasks."

Our observations revealed that lecturers were unable to give individual attention to all their students in the class. They were often restricted by the lack of time and a large number of students in the class. As a result, they only provided group attention and sometimes focused on a few active students. When they conducted pairs or group work in the classroom, they simply provided the instructions and gave students time to discuss and complete their tasks. Lecturers rarely helped their students in doing their tasks. They only remembered the names of a few students who were active in the classroom. This made most students feel unnoticed by their lecturers. The results from the interviews also confirmed these findings, for example, RM reported that,

"It is difficult for me to give individual attention to the students, so I always organize them to work in groups to make me easier to provide attention and check their works. In comparison, I have ever taught a small class consisting of five students in an English course; I could give individual attention to all of the students."

We found that it was very challenging for the lecturers to earn students' attention and keep them engaged in the lesson. Many students were more likely to show poor involvement in class. They did not pay serious attention to the lecturers' explanations. Some students played games on their cell phones, and some others chatted with their friends during the lesson. We observed that students were easily distracted by their cell phones and became disengaged in the lesson. Moreover, some of the students disturbed others who tried to be active in class. The class became so noisy and the lecturers were unable to keep the class quiet. So, they had to speak in a very loud voice to have their students' attention. A lecturer (DD) said that,

"Most students tend to be passive learners. It is much harder for me to get them engaged to the lesson, particularly when they are not ready to learn... I encourage them to ask or respond to the questions in a friendly manner. To make them comfortable asking and answering questions, without a fear of making mistakes. I always accept all of their points. When the answer is incorrect or inappropriate, I give them some clues, and then ask them to explain. I also invite their friend to give additional answers."

Giving students an opportunity to ask and answer questions from their peers was an alternative strategy applied by the lecturers to encourage students' participation. They began the class by asking questions related to the topic from the previous lesson. Then, they ended the class by asking students questions related to the new topic.

The participants affirmed that assessment was essential to know the progress of students' learning and to judge/evaluate their own teaching. Assessing students' progress was another problem in large classes. During exams, they could not provide sufficient space between each student to prevent cheating. They also had difficulty with marking their students' quizzes and tests due to insufficient time at their disposal. MM admitted,

"It is difficult to score students' quizzes and tasks. I do not have enough time to check students' work and provide feedback I rarely give them individual homework because it takes a lot of time to check their works one by one."

To respond to the challenges described above, lecturers employed several strategies. They used some methods and supporting media in teaching English. We found several general interesting strategies including asking students to bring portable fans, implementing a U-shaped seating arrangement, organizing students for collaborative learning activities, speaking loudly and powerfully, assigning group tasks, and giving more repetitions. Lecturers found that these strategies were helpful in dealing with the challenges of teaching English to their large classes.

All research participants said that managing thermal comfort in the classroom was a must for successful teaching and learning. They reported that teaching in a hot classroom environment had a negative effect on their teaching performance. One of them expressed his

feelings, "I feel so uncomfortable and get tired easily in teaching, especially in hot weather." Then, he also proposed a strategy to minimize this kind of discomfort, "I encourage the students to bring their portable fans to cool the room during hot weather."

To control their students' behaviour and actions in the class, the lecturers redesigned their classroom arrangement. For instance, a U-shaped seating formation was generally used in the classrooms. This arrangement was very helpful to maximize teaching and learning interactions, as stated by one lecturer,

"U-shaped desk configuration makes me easier to move around, monitor students' behavior and actions, and discipline them. Besides, the students do not feel hidden in this formation and had equal access to see the whiteboard or my presentations and demonstrations."

To give students individual attention, the lecturers organized the class into several groups for collaborative learning activities. One lecturer reported, "I always organize them to work in groups to make me easier to provide attention and check their works." Another lecturer stated that he often applied peer tutoring, a type of collaborative learning strategy in which one or more students teach other students. "I assign a student who has demonstrated a good mastery of the lessons to teach other students in a group." Another strategy proposed was speaking loudly and powerfully, "I speak loudly and powerfully in explaining the materials to have students listen to me and follow my instructions."

Large classes presented challenges for the lecturers to keep students engaged in the lesson. Practising collaborative learning activities and assigning teamwork projects were examples of the lecturers' strategies to keep students engaged in the lesson. To improve students' understanding, the lecturers used the repetition technique. They repeated the previous lesson. Through repetition, a skill was practised and rehearsed over time and gradually became easier. The lecturers always encouraged students to work collaboratively on their tasks, as one participant reported, "It is difficult to check and score students' individual work in a large class. I rarely give them individual assignment, because I realize that I do not have time to check it one by one." These interview data showed that organizing students in groups and assigning collaborative works were strategies used by the lecturers in assessing students' learning progress.

Interpretation of results

Large classes posed several teaching challenges associated with discomfort, students' behaviour and actions, individual attention, learning engagement, and learning assessment. The first challenge was feeling discomfort. The lecturers felt uncomfortable teaching large classes for several reasons. A large number of the students in a class, around 28 to 40, was really not ideal for effective language teaching and learning. They could not get closer to students for more learning assistance during class activities. Another reason was related to the classroom thermal condition. In this study, the participants complained that in hot weather, the thermal condition was very poor with so many students and chairs in the classroom, which might increase thermal discomfort and reduce attention and concentration spans. Most school classrooms worldwide experience higher air temperatures during warmer weather. Providing some means to maintain classroom temperatures steady would increase educational performance. Improving thermal classroom conditions can substantially improve schoolwork performance. In this case, one quick solution to deal with the lecturers' thermal discomfort is installing additional cooling devices such as ceiling fans or air conditioning units.

Recognizing students and controlling their behaviour were also challenging for the lecturers. The lecturers could not recognize all of their students easily. Their struggles to remember names and match names to faces often failed, especially at the beginning of a new semester. They stood in front, wrote and explained things from the board. As a result, students' attendance and actions in the back rows were not clearly observable from the front of the class. Actually, being remembered and recognized by the lecturer could be emotional support for the students to perform better learning. On the contrary, feeling anonymous in a large class tends to create disengagement in learning. What has been done by the lecturers in this study can be an alternative solution to the problem. Redesigning classroom arrangements was one alternative solution. For instance, a U-shaped seating formation was

generally used in the classrooms. This arrangement was very helpful for the lecturers to observe students' behaviour and actions and to provide individual assistance.

Giving students individual attention in large classes was often restricted by the lack of time and students' space. To provide individual attention to a class of more than 30 students, the lecturers needed to keep moving to check which students needed further instruction, encouragement, or any other learning assistance from the lecturer. In this study, the lecturers only provided group attention and sometimes simply focused on a few active students. They only provided instructions and gave students time to discuss in groups and complete their tasks. They hardly monitored those who needed help in doing their tasks. This made most students feel unnoticed and untreated by their lecturers. This kind of feeling might disengage them from learning. One of the strategies used by the lecturers was peer teaching. Peer teaching involved one or more students teaching other students in a particular subject area. They practised learning in groups and cooperated in taking roles as teachers or tutors. At the higher education level, peer tutoring or peer teaching is appropriate to assist students and provide them with the experience of teaching. This has shown that students can learn from their friends.

Keeping students' engagement was also challenging for the lecturers. Students' engagement refers to the attention, interest, and curiosity that they show in learning. Large classes presented challenges for the lecturers to keep students engaged in the lesson. Practising collaborative learning activities and assigning teamwork projects were among the strategies lecturers used to keep students engaged in class. Poor student engagement would result in students' lower understanding of the lessons. To improve students' understanding, the repetition technique could also be applied. For example, a difficult skill, when practised and rehearsed over time, will become easier. Re-explaining unclear ideas from the previous lesson can encourage deeper learning and better understanding.

In addition, assessing students' learning progress in large classes was also challenging for the lecturers. Lecturers faced difficulty scoring the quizzes and tests and giving feedback within a limited time. To measure students' language skills, they would probably spend a larger amount of time because assessing skills required personal feedback. In this case, giving students the opportunity to ask and answer questions from their peers could be an alternative strategy to involve students in class. They began the class with some questions related to the topic from the previous lesson and ended the class by asking students questions related to the more recent topic.

Concluding remarks

Drawing on qualitative methods of research, in this study, we have attempted to add to the understanding of the challenges of teaching English to large classes. Among these challenges, we identified the following: thermal discomfort and tiredness, especially in hot weather, insufficient time at the lecturers' disposal, class control difficulties, inability to give individual attention, inability to keep up students' engagement, and inability to assess the learning progress. In this study, we demonstrated that lecturers teaching English to large classes had found some ways out or developed some strategies to cope with these challenges. These included using portable cooling devices, assigning group works, organizing peer tutoring, using U-shaped seating arrangements, opting for friendly questioning strategies, and assigning teamwork projects.

In addition, we hope that through this study we have been able to provide the sort of evidence that is very important for providing support to lecturers who teach English to large classes in tertiary education in Indonesia, but not only. There may be dissimilarities in the challenges of teaching and learning English in large classes as faced by lecturers who teach in big higher education institutions and those who teach in small higher education institutions. Future research may be needed to focus on the comparative dimension of this study, that is, to research the kind of challenges faced and the respective strategies employed by the lecturers who teach English in big universities as compared to those who teach English in small universities.

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