Teaching large classes: contexts, challenges and *potential* solutions

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APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Plan for the session

1. What constitutes a large class?
   Critical discussion 1: Why is '**large classes**' a thing?
2. In what contexts are they found?
3. '**Large classes**' as part of '**teaching in difficult circumstances**'
4. Key challenges of large classes
5. Potential solutions for these challenges
6. Free support for large class contexts
   Critical discussion 2: North-South and East-West perspectives.

Which of these classes are 'large'?

What constitutes a large class?

- Sources typically cite 40 students in class (e.g., Shamim & Kuchah, 2016); this is *not* the same as a teacher: pupil ratio of 40:1 (see Coleman, 2018), which typically indicates smaller in-class sizes.

- This will depend on contexts – compare primary schools and universities.

Coleman, H. (2018). An almost invisible 'difficult circumstance': The large class. In K. Kuchah & F. Shamim (Eds.), International perspectives on teaching English in difficult circumstances: Contexts, challenges and possibilities (pp. 29-48). Palgrave Macmillan.
Shamim, F. & Kuchah, K. (2016). Teaching large classes in difficult circumstances. In G. Hall (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of English Language Teaching* (pp. 527-541). Taylor & Francis.

Critical discussion 1: Why is 'large classes' a thing?

1. To what extent are 'large classes' a product of Western ideas in education (small classes are the norm), imposed on other contexts around the world?

2. If we adopt a critical perspective on these Western ideas, is there necessarily any problems inherent in classes of 40+ learners?

3. If we accept the Western ideas (e.g., learner-centred education, communicative language teaching, democratic classrooms, etc.), what are the main areas of challenge we may experience in large classes?

4. Should we overcome these challenges by either: a) attempting to apply 'fixes' to the problems identified without changing the underlying (Western) approach, or b) question or abandon the underlying approach?

Two common context types

1. Tertiary education (elective)
   students usually literate, independent, motivated learners

2. Primary and secondary education (compulsory)
   students still learning to learn

Teaching in difficult circumstances (TIDC)

According to Anderson et al. (2021), TIDC includes:

1. large classes, typically over 40 learners;

2. a lack of basic resources, including textbooks, furniture, stationery, electricity, and even suitable classrooms;

3. low school readiness of learners;

4. inadequate pre-service and in-service training and support for teachers;

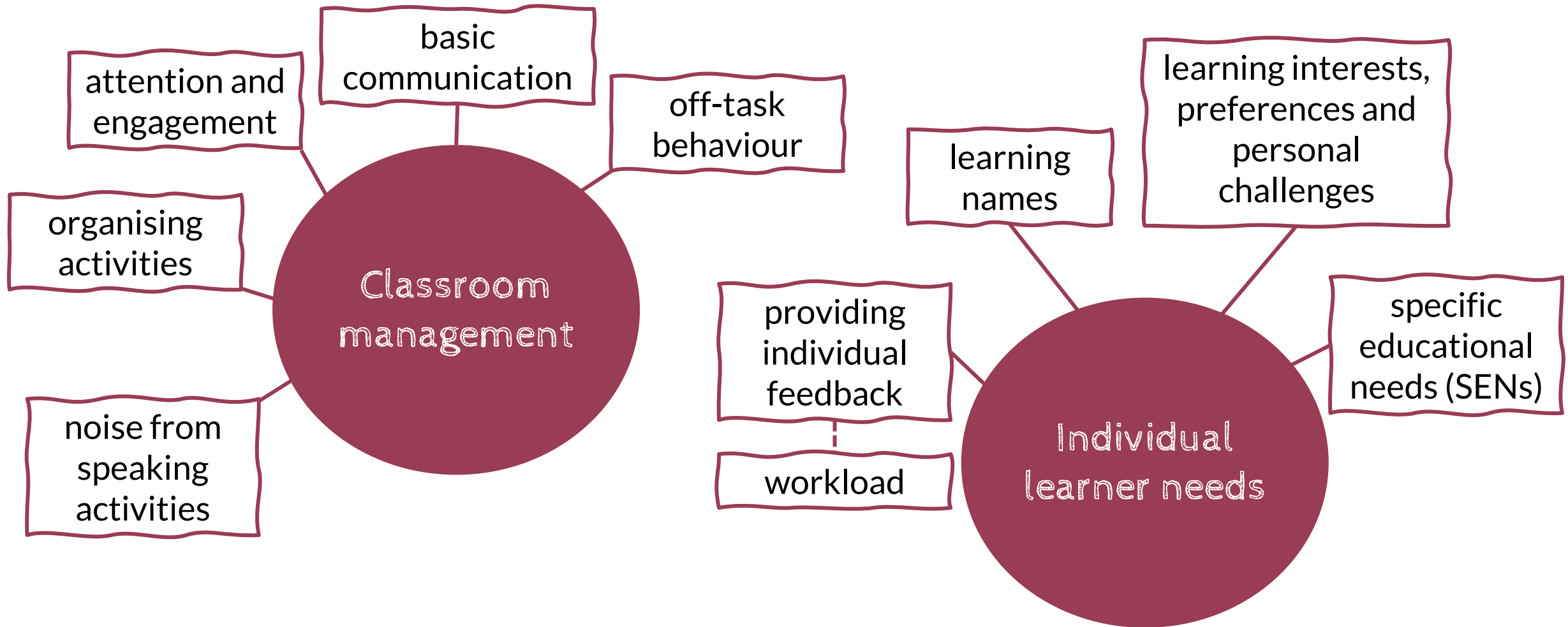5. excessive workload for teachers and other staff.

According to Anderson (2023), it's important to extend the discussion of challenges faced in education in the global South (i.e., much TIDC) to 4 areas:

1. Challenges the learner faces
2. Challenges the teacher faces
3. Challenges within the school environment
4. Challenges of the wider educational system

Anderson, J. (2023). *Teacher expertise in the global South: Theory, research and evidence.* Cambridge University Press.
Anderson, J. Padwad, A., & Smith, R. (2021). Language teaching in difficult circumstances. In C. Coombe, & H. Mohebbi (Eds.), *Research questions in language education: A reference guide for teachers.* Springer.

Challenges of large classes – 2 key areas

Classroom management
- attention and engagement
- basic communication
- off-task behaviour
- organising activities
- noise from speaking activities

Individual learner needs
- learning names
- learning interests, preferences and personal challenges
- specific educational needs (SENs)
- providing individual feedback
- workload

Solutions – 2 key areas

1. **Institutional**
   - design of classrooms (size, dais, ventilation, shape, seating, etc.)
   - class allocation – teachers should retain students whenever possible between academic years (they know their names, needs, and have developed relationships)

2. **Classroom management**
   - clear routines and rules
   - behaviour management
   - whole-class interactive teaching
   - activities
   - cooperative learning
   - finding space

Clear routines and rules

- Involve the learners (e.g., homework monitors, tidying monitors, management monitors, etc.)

- Rituals for answering questions (e.g., hands up, no noise), getting silence (e.g., a distinctive noise or 'hands up' strategy).

- Establish rules at start of year, and stick to them.

Classroom Contract
Class 3B

The Learners

We agree to:

1. speak only English during speaking practice activities
2. work together as a team
3. do our homework on time
4. ask questions when we don't understand something
5. learn 20 new words every week

The Teacher

I agree to:

1. share my lesson aims at the start of each lesson
2. be punctual and well prepared for every lesson
3. mark writing work within three days of receiving it
4. include at least one game or song in every lesson

From: Anderson, J. (2015). *Teaching English in Africa*. East African Educational Publishers.

Behaviour management in large classes

- Notice and praise good behaviour!
- Have a carefully considered hierarchy of sanctions:
  - warning ➡ reseating ➡ extra work ➡ etc. ➡ informing parents
- Avoid humiliation of learners
- Have pep talks with regular disruptors; sit down, listen, decide, explain, build rapport, notice possible causes (e.g., ADHD)
- (see Anderson, 2023)

Whole class interactive teaching

Whole class interactive teaching

- Collaborative approaches can be challenging in large classes.

- Whole class interactive approaches are also known to be effective (see, e.g., Campbell et al., 2004; Hattie, 2009, on Direct Instruction (D=0.59)).

- Lower cognitive load of whole class teaching (e.g., Kirschner et al., 2006).

- Can include questioning, elicitation, songs, drills, etc.

Campbell, R. J., Kyriakides, L., Muijs, R. D., & Robinson, W. (2003). Differential teacher effectiveness: Towards a model for research and teacher appraisal. *Oxford Review of Education, 29*(3), 347–362.
Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning.* Routledge.
Kirschner, P. A., Sweller, J., & Clark, R. E. (2006). Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: An analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. *Educational Psychologist, 41*(2), 75-86.

Activities

- Pair and groupwork speaking are possible, but challenging (esp. noise levels, off-task behaviour)

- Individual skills practice also possible: writing and reading

- Peer-support during writing practice (e.g., using desk groups)

- Activities provide time for "active monitoring" (Anderson, 2023), incl. individual support.

Anderson, J. (2023). *Teacher expertise in the global South: Theory, research and evidence*. Cambridge University Press.

desk groups

Cooperative learning can work (sometimes)

Basic coop. learning rules apply:

- Create balanced, stable, mixed-ability groups of 3-6 learners

- Give learners specific roles within the group and rotate these

- Ensure that the activities make whole group accountable for success

(Anderson, 2019)

Anderson, J. (2019). *Activities for cooperative learning.* Delta Publishing.

Using space

- Reduces the 'pressure-cooker' environment
- Students get fresh air
- Teacher monitoring easier

- When expected to work autonomously, learners often respond positively to the challenge
- Good for project work

Free online resources and support

TELCnet (Teaching in Large Classes): http://telcnet.weebly.com/ Also on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/telcgroup

Webinar: Teaching English in large classes: A sociocultural approach (Anderson, 2016) https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-english-large-classes-%E2%80%93-a-sociocultural-approach

Maximising learning in large classes (Shamim et al, 2010) https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/ELT-16-screen.pdf

What to consider when teaching large classes (Anderson, 2016) https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/what-consider-when-teaching-english-large-classes

Teaching large classes (Anderson, 2015)

http://www.jasonanderson.org.uk/downloads/Anderson_2015_Teaching_large_classes.pdf

Critical discussion 1 ==revisited==: Why is 'large classes' a thing?

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Critical discussion 2

1. Shanghai Province can achieve better PISA results with large classes than Western European countries with much smaller classes. How? What are the implications here?

2. Low-cost private schools in sub-Saharan Africa and India often have larger classes than government schools, yet achieve higher results. How? Does this mean large classes are more effective?

3. Which language teaching approaches are likely to work better and worse in large classes? Why? Implications?
    a) communicative language teaching
    b) audiolingual method
    c) 'grammar-translation' approaches

References

Anderson, J. (2015). *Teaching English in Africa*. East African Educational Publishers.

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