The Big Challenge: Teaching Large Multi-Level Classes
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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to discuss the ways in which an instructor can create a productive learning environment in a large multilevel classroom setting in countries where there are limited resources for teaching. First, the conditions of a large multilevel class are defined. Next, the benefits and challenges of large multilevel classes are discussed. This is followed by a section that suggests strategies for coping in this environment. The first area related to coping addressed is routines, followed by activities for student motivation and activation, and suggestions for teaching writing. After that there are suggestions for teaching large multilevel classes with limited resources.

Introduction
Teaching large English language classes to non-native learners presents many challenges throughout the world. These challenges can be impacted by the fact that more often than not, the classes are multilevel as well. Moreover, in countries where Teacher Helping Teachers (THT) give seminars (Vietnam, Laos, the Philippines, Bangladesh, etc.) often there is also the added problem of inadequate resources or no supplies of any kind. Despite these challenges, meaningful learning can and does take place. This paper will discuss the ways in which an instructor can create a productive learning environment in a large multilevel classroom setting. These suggestions come from Baker & Westrup (2000), Hess (2001), Renaud, Tannebaum, & Standal (2007) and the author’s personal experience teaching large multilevel classes.

To begin with, it will be useful to define what is considered to be “a large multilevel” class. Hess (2001) defines a large class as thirty or more in her book. Ur (1996) suggests that 40-50 students constitute a large class. However, Baker and Westrup (2002) provide a useful definition by stating that: “a large class can be any number of students, if the teacher feels there are too many students for them all to make progress.” Some of these classes have been roughly created according to ability, or by age group, however, many are not. And, in some cases there are teachers who have to manage anywhere from 80-100 students in a single class. However, these situations usually result in situations where the students will vary significantly in their language and literacy skills.

Benefits and Challenges
There are some benefits to teaching large multilevel classes that ought to be acknowledged. To begin with, there are always enough students for interaction. Ur (1996) points out that the teacher is not able to attend to every individual student, thus, the students must develop strategies for helping themselves and their classmates through peer-teaching and collaboration which fosters an atmosphere of cooperation. Therefore, the teacher is not the only instructor/advanced students can explain and demonstrate tasks to lower level students. Thus, having a large class in which to use advanced students as examples/tutors can be seen as a benefit. Furthermore, professional development occurs naturally for the instructors who are forced to come to terms with how to best facilitate a large multilevel class by inventing and developing new ways of organizing material. And it compels the teacher to find better ways of setting up routine activities.
Perhaps, it is honest to suggest that there are more challenges than benefits to teaching large multilevel classes. For example, many teachers feel out of control in such an environment. In addition, many teachers also feel trapped in the problems of management; keeping students on task and speaking in English. Then there is the difficulty of providing for individual learning styles. It can also be difficult to motivate and activate quiet students in a large group setting. There can be occasions where teachers can be frustrated by the huge amount of written work. As mentioned earlier, there is also the problem of teaching with limited resources in many of the THT host countries. However, these challenges are not insurmountable; there are several strategies for coping with such issues.

**Strategies for coping**

There are a number of strategies for coping with large, multilevel classes. Some of these are general strategies that instructors can incorporate into their teaching routines. Other strategies inform syllabus writing or planning/materials development in that they will help motivate and activate language use in the classroom. And since the author has taught some writing classes with 40-60 students, some suggestions for coping with large writing classes are included.

**Routines**

One of the basic strategies for coping with large multilevel classes involves setting up routines. This can include things like creating a seating chart and strategies for taking attendance, writing the day’s activities on the board, posting deadlines in a visible place, or starting the day with a warm up activity among other considerations. Some other considerations include having established groups in advance for group work and establishing quiet signals to show students when to start and stop activities.

Perhaps, the first and most important coping strategy involves knowing student names. There are several reasons for this and the most basic is to create human relations and to promote a comfortable atmosphere where everyone knows each other and feels comfortable sharing and experimenting in front of one another. Also knowing names can be helpful in the administrative sense by keeping attendance and keeping track of grades. Knowing names is also useful for class management in that you can single out students who are not using English or not on task by name. There are a variety of methods for learning student names including the use of seating charts, name placards, ice breaking activities (like “Find someone who...”), student introductions, and name games (like “I am and I love...” or “Names and adjectives”).

There are a variety of warm-up activities to get students focused on English at the beginning of a class that can be incorporated into a routine. Some warm up activities include: songs, games (hangman, telephone, bingo, etc.), quizzes, and discussion questions. Reviewing material is also a common warm up activity. Recycling and reinforcement is important in large multilevel classes and doing this at the beginning of class can reinforce concepts learned in previous lessons. Some examples include: expansion activities, answers to questions, making review posters, review of learned vocabulary (for example: person/place/thing).

**Student Motivation and Activation**

Another effective strategy for coping involves motivating students to learn and activating usage of English in the classroom. There are several effective strategies for
student motivation and activation. However, Hess (2001) points out that there are a few important things to remember: it is not necessary to hear everything said or read everything written, students should talk about real issues of importance to them, and there should be activities with many choices of expression. Some suggested topics and themes that might be of interest to students include: People I Admire/Special Places/Dreams I Have/How I Feel Now/Friendship/Favorite Things/Shopping/Travel/Eating Out/Careers/Movies.

There are a number of strategies in classroom instruction and curriculum planning that can enhance lessons for large multilevel groups and promote motivation. One area is using a variety of classroom activities. This can be effective for motivation and activation, for example, by mixing activities like lectures, small group work and pair work. Pace is another important consideration when addressing student motivation and activation. It is useful to make provisions for students who finish early and create activities for students who require extra time. Also, it is important to consider individualization, which allows for personalization, choice, and open endedness that can inspire motivation and lead to activation. Ur (1996) describes individualization as a situation in which learners are given freedom to choose what they learn and adopt or select tasks and materials, which suit them as individuals. (p.233) This means creating opportunities for students to work on projects of interest to them as well as chances to exercise language at their own level of competence. Some examples of these activities include portfolio projects, diaries, and poster reports.

It is also effective to have students collaborate and do group work or incorporate project based learning as a means of motivation and activation. Some grouping suggestions from Hess (2001) for activities are: dialogue practice/vocabulary drills/grammar review in pairs, problem solving in small groups, discussions triads, introductions or social interactions with four students or whole class-surveys. Another suggestion is to have students work in groups to produce one piece of writing for each group or complete grammar exercises together. In addition to these activities, there are a number of group projects students can undertake like making original comics in English, collaborating on brochures or newspapers, peer review and collaborative writing and group presentations and/or poster presentations.

Suggestions for Teaching Writing
There are a number of approaches that can make teaching writing to large multilevel groups easier and more effective. Writing can be taught together with other skills, but if the course is a writing course, it is usually most effective when employing the writing cycle. The first stage in the writing cycle is the pre-writing stage to decide upon a topic. This involves techniques like brainstorming, clustering, and lists. After the topic has been decided the next steps are writing a thesis followed by an outline. Once these have been decided the students write a first draft. Peer editing is an essential part of the writing cycle and students can edit each other’s first drafts. One approach can require students to have one self edit and two peer edits before teacher evaluates the final draft: this would suggest that the first and second drafts would have peer edits for content and technical aspects of writing with one final self edit before handing in the final draft for evaluation. In the event that a large portion of the students are low level it can be useful to give students examples of common writing errors in regards to style, usage, spelling, or grammar then edit for those examples. For example, if the students are having trouble with subject and verb agreement, a mini-lesson with examples before editing will help students identify
errors in their individual writing and that of their classmates. The writing cycle can include a portfolio of student drafts to bring to writing conferences in order to get meaningful feedback, but the peer editing should also provide meaningful feedback.

**Teaching with Limited Resources**

As mentioned earlier, many of the teachers who attend THT seminars have the added burden of a lack of resources. This could mean no textbooks, no access to photocopiers, little access to books, or no electricity. Renard, et al. (2007) suggest an alternative to writing notes on the board is for students to copy as the teacher dictates the information using dictogloss. He does not suggest that this activity be used instead of writing notes on the board exclusively, but rather as a supplemental activity to use on occasion. This is a method where students listen to a passage twice read at normal speed, taking notes during the second reading. Then students work with a partner to try and reassemble the text. Once the pair thinks that they have the correct reconstruction they write the section on the board and the whole class work together to recreate the original as much as possible. Then the teacher makes the final corrections. In order to save time during class, teachers can write texts or questions on large sheets of paper before class rather than writing on the board. If the class is especially big, then two or three copies can be made. Teachers can also ask students to bring an item from home to use as a talking or writing point for the class. Another suggestion is using pictures from magazines or drawn to illustrate vocabulary or create interest in reading, speaking, or writing activities. Use what the students say themselves as the input. This can be done by having student change direct speech into indirect speech, having the a student ask a question and then have another report orally or in writing what the student said, or students can make statements on topics provided by the teacher and the rest of the class writes it down as student-centered dictation.

**Conclusion**

Of course every teacher would like to have a class of less than 10 students in a state of the art classroom with all the latest access to technology. However, that is a far cry from what many teachers who attend THT seminars throughout the world. But this does not mean that they cannot effectively teach large multilevel groups. And it is the individual teacher’s role that is effective in determining the rate of language acquisition and learning in the classroom. If the teacher is open to reorganizing the classroom and allowing more activities, then the student will be in a better position to learn. The coping strategies that focus on routines, motivation and activation, and teaching writing offer some possibilities for incorporating new ideas in the classroom. The final section related to teaching with limited resources suggests ways to do more with less. There are always ways to make learning more fun, easier for the teacher and students, so it is important to keep looking for better more effective ways of instruction.

**Biographical Statement**

Patrick McCoy is an Assistant Professor in the English section of the School of Global Japanese Studies at Meiji University in Tokyo. He has a BA in Literature from the University of Washington and a MA in Education from Western Washington University. He has lived in Japan for 14 years and has been teaching at the university level for 11 years. He has participated in THT seminars in Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, and Laos. His research interests include using and developing authentic materials, methodology, and film.
References

