A Case Study of Teaching Speaking Skills in Large Classes: Problems and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Class size is a major concern at any educational setup. However, when we talk about large classes, its notion varies from country to country and context to context. There is no exact quantitative definition of what means a large class does not have the exact size; it is measured by number of students per teacher, and various perceptions teachers have regarding the large classes in their teaching and learning context, issues, challenges, classroom management strategies, assessment and feedback methods and recommendations, etc. This study investigates the teachers' perception of teaching speaking skills in large classes, various issues and strategies. There is substantial research evidence that teaching speaking skills in large classes contribute significant challenges for both, teachers and students. However, when some professional and experienced teachers used large classroom teaching strategies and speaking activities, practicing speaking skills was no more a challenge for them. They also enjoyed teaching speaking in large classes via various classroom management techniques, strategies, activities and through standard speaking lesson plan. The study followed a qualitative research paradigm. A case study with detailed semi-structured interviews was used to precede the research. A sample of 15 English Language Teachers (ELTs) as research participants were selected from different public and private sector universities of Karachi. Interviews were transcribed first than initial and focus coding and themes were generated for open ended questions. The major themes were related to the issues/ challenges, classroom management strategies, assessment and feedback methods and recommendations of teaching speaking skills in large classes.

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1.   Introduction

The capability to use English for oral communication is one of the core reasons why most people learn English. Nowadays learning English as foreign language is famous as an urgent task. The impact of English as an international language advocates people try to maintain their fluency in spoken English to maintain their educational purposes, social relationships, work and business or for traveling to other countries (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015; Sadeghi, Richards, & Ghaderi, 2020). Speaking is a part of our daily life with different contexts, e.g. children speak at home, at schools, and they communicate with their friends as well. Speaking is a productive skill of a child that points out that speaking skill depends on other skills. Some of English Language practitioners said that teaching speaking skills is a challenging task for the instructors. It becomes more difficult when speaking skill is being taught in large classes (House, 2012).

Large class is the issue in developing countries. Most of the teachers in Asia who are working at schools point out that the number of students in every class exceeds the limit of 50; the concept of a large class varies from context to context (UNESCO, 2006). An average number

of students in every class in China is between 50 to 100 (Qiang & Ning, 2011). In the Pakistani context, a large class consists of 30 to 35 students (Jokhio, Raza, Younus, & Soomro, 2020).

On the other hand, the definition varies from context to context and country to country. Teachers who are dealing with the large classes reported that students are not able to receive the quality of education in overcrowded classes, additionally, teachers also dislike large classes, especially for English teaching and learning classes. The substitute for large classes is only to adapt improved, latest techniques to manage the large classes of English (Nan, 2014). Cooperative learning suits best to the environment of large classes where getting engaged with the students is a landmark for the teacher (Chen, 2007).

Students and professionals of different domains get enrolled in English language academic institutions and various other universities to improve their verbal competence and English proficiency. Students learn English from grade one to graduation as a compulsory subject and after completing fourteen years of learning in English seek admission in language centers to enhance verbal fluency. It is the responsibility of the language instructor to select speaking activities that suit best their level in order to create a horizon of learning which is feasible for both small and large classes. To investigate the challenges in large classes, the researcher conducts a qualitative research study.

1.1. Objectives of the study
The objective of this study is to highlight the issues faced by teachers when teaching speaking skills in large classes at university level and it provides the estimated solutions to overcome the challenges of teaching speaking skills in large classes.

1.2. Research Question
The objectives of the study will be explored by the following questions:

- What are the major issues in teaching speaking skills in large classes at public and private universities?
- What are the strategies used by the Pakistani teachers to deal with these issues?

2. Review of Related Literature
2.1. Large Class and its Impact on Learning
The size of the class has a great impact on learners' educational and social relationship in any speaking and communication skills class. Learners in small classes are easy to handle, more apparently by the teachers during the classroom activities. Teachers can easily cross question them; there is no difficulty for the teacher to assess their students, efficiently and effectively (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003).

The model of student's engagement in a large class refers to application, response and collaboration. It raises students to stimulate their learning sense with the help of creativity, and it also provides a chance to bring excitement in a large classroom. It provides guidelines to the teacher to create the environments where the students are learning with their heart and soul. The main principle includes an educational approach to deal with communication skill classes which are large in size. It can be used to develop the material for the classroom and also provides help in assessing a large number of students' material (Hourigan, 2013). On the other hand, there is not any positive relationship between class size and learning outcomes, class size does not matter in classroom engagement. It is a large class or a small class the learning objectives and outcomes are same. The learners who are enrolled in the large classes are more proficient and more communicative smart as compared to the students who are enrolled in small classes. Additionally, the teacher is not only responsible for a student's low speaking proficiency might be because the goals of language learning and assessment rubrics are not clear to the students (Ekembe, 2014).

2.2. Teaching Speaking Skills
The successful teaching of communication skills in large classes is to modify the language, context and cultural differences of the country where English is being taught. Normally speaking skill is taken less award-winning than other skills, it is being neglected in classroom practices. And often it is handed over to novice teachers but as compared to novice teachers the speaking

can be taught by trained teachers rather than inexperienced teachers. (Baleghizadeh & Nasrollahi Shahri, 2014).

Speaking English is marked as a goal by many students throughout the globe. Additionally English is learnt by a large number of students across the world. Most of the students are willing to enhance their fluency in order to communicate with foreigners but developing fluency in a second language is marked as a challenging task by most of the students. The students felt difficulty to overcome the linguistics deficiency, in processing oral language with emotional pressure to deal with the perspective of using English for the verbal and communiqué purposes (Gan, 2013; Kawai, 2008; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Students are not able to master the sounds and phonemes of English language, besides the pronunciation, gesticulation, body language and non-verbal contact is also important for speaking English (Fraser, 2001).

While speaking, grammar is also an important linguistics area, combining the words into proper sentence structure. It refers to the elementary rules and organization of the spoken and written language, focusing on subject verb agreement and structure of words (Batko & Rosenheim, 2004). Along grammar, vocabulary is also important as second language learning, it is important for fluent and accurate communication. There is slightly difference in oral and written vocabulary and grammar. According to teachers, they reported that extensive word bank and proper grammar is a set of combination which push learners to speak with confidence and accuracy. Hiebert and Kamil (2005) argue that teachers do not correct the vocabulary and grammar errors while speaking or post speaking because it will lead students to be demotivated and the learners will not be fluent as they were trying to be.

Fluency in spoken language is widely described by the teacher with different points of view, the teachers reported that speaking fluency is the reflection for the practice of speaking done by the individuals, sometimes it is a reproduction of the teacher which is produced by the learners in the view point of fluency. Language teachers have to take initiatives for the endorsement of fluency while speaking in the class (Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018). EFL teachers believed that increased time for teaching speaking skills, adapting communicative teaching methods, and student-centered learning could enhance students' English communication skills. Other factors, such as university assessment policies, large class sizes, textbooks and student characteristics as barriers to quality teaching that are responsible for eroding student motivation (Vu, 2023).

3.   Methodology

The study was qualitative in nature and it aimed to mark the issues highlighted by the university teachers with the context of large classes and to provide estimated solutions for it. For data collection, the research interview guide was designed and it was approved by the language experts. Semi-structured detailed interviews were conducted. The approximate length of the interview was 30-35 minutes. Fifteen teachers from the public and private sectors both were interviewed. Interviews were recorded by using a mobile phone. The interviews were initially transcribed followed by initial coding, focused coding, and then thematic analysis were performed in order to extract the themes.

3.1.   Ethical Consideration

To ensure the ethical values of the research the researcher contacted the participants via email. When they responded, the meeting was fixed, and before recording the interview, researcher asked for it. All the ethical considerations were followed.

4.   Data Analysis
4.1.   Thematic Analysis and Findings

Detail of the findings and thematic analysis is appended below:

Theme 1: "What is a large class?"

The first theme emerged from the data is regarding the precipitation of large classes in the psyche of university teachers. A class which consists of more than sixty students will be considered as a large class. As one of the respondent said: "*it depends upon individual but I feel that a class that has number exceeding 45, 50 at university level it may be 60 + is a last, generally speaking 60 + in my opinion in my keeping in view Dr Fozia Shameem in additional*

there are many other factors for example the resources the available resources the available is space teaching method of teachers and learners ability also make it large" (R-4). Respondents three and eight suggested their own understanding of the large class, respondent three said: *"At least thirty students in a single classroom so that would be considered as large class" (R-3)* and respondent eight said: *"50-60 students in a class is a very large class"*. Approximately 30% of the respondents on behalf of their personal experience suggested that if students exceed from 30, it will be considered as a large class in general and the 70 percent agree on that when students exceed from 60 will be considered as a large class along with the students the other factors like space, lack of furniture and resources are also involved for making a class large enough.

Theme 2: "Advantages of teaching speaking skills to a large class"

Students enrolled in large classes have diverse backgrounds, multiple are intelligent and are there to help and support the other students with their background knowledge. A teacher has a variety of ideas and arguments for a single topic which leads to having in depth discussions with real life examples. As the respondent said: *"Main positive aspect of increasing speaking or anything is that you have a number of different ideas that especially then you but if you want you have an argument that you have to express your thought which will lead to enrich conversation giving their Review that is one of the positive aspect" (R-8)*. The candidate six suggested that one can have the cultural information under the one roof, the students are exposed to different culture and backgrounds without going to them, the respondent said: *"it comes to the advantages the cultural diversity will be having inner classes for example there are the students from different backgrounds" (R-6)*, among them (the students) few students have strong vocabulary and some are fluent in speaking skills which helps teacher to form the groups with different mindsets among the students, as aspirant ten said: *"like somebody has that for fluency somebody has better vocabulary when they interact with variety of people more opportunity to improve" (R-10).* Classes with a large number of students help learners to boost up their confidence level. Additionally, due to variety of tasks, activities in speaking sessions the students who are quiet and they do not speak much, they are invoked to speak in during the slot of the class and motivates the backbenchers to participate in the activities as the respondent said: *" it allows every student to take part in that activity so most of the quiet and silent students the backbenchers have something to say in those activities so it has a positive effect" (R-7)* and the response of respondent four is: *"they were enthusiastic in participating with in the class that's why I assume naturally" (R-4)*. The nature of speaking classes is engaging because it prepares the students to deal with the real life situation. It helps them to speak in front of large audiences, as the respondent said: *"large Groups are very engaging and most of the classes are one way monologic" (R-7)*.

Theme 3: "Issues of teaching speaking skills to the large class"

Large class are not ideally visualized for productive skills because it needs the individual attention as one of the respondent said: *"There are many reasons that why large classes are bad idea for one thing when it comes to productive skills English speaking and writing that you have to give the individual feedback otherwise you will fail giving individual feedback and noise factor in group discussion" (R-8)*. If a teacher is able to provide attention and feedback then large classes may be ideal for the productive skills as well and he/she is able to manage the disciplinary issues. The overall experience is marked positively except the two challenges one is feedback and other is assessment challenge, as the respondent said: *"I would say it was a good experience and there are the two expects one is from the viewpoint of assessment and feedback the other is in the view back and the students point of view" (R-6)*.

The other issue was highlighted by the respondent from the public sector university was the late arrival of the students the respondents said: *"Students are showing up water drops sprinkling in the class for 15 to 20 or 25 minutes so the class is not a assemble the students show up 8:30 and the ones coming and in the class students are joining the class so managing the class become a challenge When you have to either repeat you have what you have done or ignore that students" (R-7)*, *"And in fact students factors are always there like coming late going early" (R-5)*.

It is observed by the teachers that sometimes teachers are not available and sometimes rooms are not available to entertain the huge number of enrollment as respondent three said: *"Management I think so I mean they find due to lack of rooms alright due to lack of teachers availability they have less teachers you merge two classes into one and all they do create one class" (R-3), "Infrastructure is very poor" (R-5),* due to poor infrastructure if there is space of forty students and sixty are sitting inside the classroom, to some extent, this issue is also being noted.

Besides the time issue the other factor highlighted by the respondent was that due to lack of time individual attention is not provided to all students and as the respondent said: *"I guess so in a single session it is not possible at all that we cannot assess every student" (R-7)*. Another issue from view point of attention is that the students start posing questions regarding their queries and this leads to disturbance in the class, as respondent one said: *"I attend five or more students from all around the class and they start posing questions sir come to us sir listen to us this is our problem, but kids are kids" (R-1)*. This resulted that time and punctuality of the students of both teachers and students are the problems for the large classes and it is not possible for a teacher to provide individual attention to every student, besides all the challenge, the other factor is training of a teacher, a teacher must be trained, novice teacher does not find an ideal teacher for dealing with large class, as the respondent said: *"a novice teacher, if you put him in to a large class he will briskly be flopped but if someone have been in the profession he will easily handle it" (R-1)* and *"If a teacher is trained I'm saying confidently the large class is an opportunity". "A novice teacher may be able to deal with the large classes if training is provided" (R-2)*.

The large classes for speaking skills are marked as a challenge by 30 percent of the respondents but the challenge is being accepted by them and they deal with it properly. In a few cases it seems challenging in the beginning of the career but with the passage of time they overcome it, few challenges are faced by the teachers but they are able to manage it.

Theme 4: "Strategies for teaching speaking skills to large class effectively"

Language teachers of English use a variety of strategies to teach and develop the speaking skills for example group work with certain rules and clear instructions. Rules of group should be like that in group work every individual will be assessed individually. That individual assessment will provoke students to prepare them for the real task and it inspires them to participate in the variety of activities. Here is response of the one of the interviewees: *"Normally what I kept is role plays there are different situations and formalization of that language, talking to their friend, they are allow to use common pathetic language, the role play is very important part" (R-6)* and respondent six said: *"I make them clear that you will be assessed individually there would be individual assessment" (R-9)*. Presentations with reference to feedback were also found useful for teaching speaking skills as the respondent said: *"Strategies when it comes to presentations giving students topics and giving them time to prepare their presentations and giving them feedback are very useful" (R-7)*. The other strategy for teaching speaking skill was highlighted by a female respondent, her views were that minimal code switching should be allowed to those students who tried better to speak but it should not be on regular bases she says: *"if they are really struggling really working than should code switch but it should not be continuous" (R-2)*. A part from the group work the other strategy namely "impromptu Speech" was also found useful, the respondent said: *"I tell my students today that take out the chits and they have to write some topics on it and once they have written the topic and I have I told them folded sheets and I have to collect it and I just jumble them up so students have to come out of the audience and pick up a chit and he or she get certain time to 3 minutes to prepare and they have to come in front of the class and they have to talk about it" (R-9)*. The group activity was also found useful for the speaking skills as the respondent said: *"One activity that I have already mentioned is a group work where they work together, they plan together and they get their presentations for the speaking session as activities and other reasons" (R-10)*.

In case of the activity during the class the students who are free are asked to make the written scripts of the audio what they have listened to. This strategy will help the teacher to have discipline in the class and the noise factor will automatically reduce and students will listen to each other. The words of the respondents' one was being reported: "I find it useful not to let every student speak or involve in the activity form the 20 groups or 15 groups. I ask half of the

groups to participate in speaking activity whereas remaining participants are being directed to make the scripts to remain silent. So, fifty percent of noise can be listened" *(R-1 & 2)*, besides it a teacher has to check the seating arrangement of the class because it has an impact learning, as respondent eight said: *"I think that the fish bowl game shuffling students up learning to work with the students learning to work with the other students if you have large classroom then ask the students to sit in the u shape and the student is able to see the students" (R-8)*.

As far as the strategies are concerned the teacher has plenty of strategies to deal with it but the most important thing is rubrics, if rubrics are with the teacher it allows him/her to judge the student in the proper way. As the respondent seven has some rubrics for assessing the presentation he said: *"For the presentation, there are specific things to note when it comes to content and organization of the presentation and how it should be delivered. Putting all these things together in presentation skills then I would focus on students' intonation, stress, speaking capability and use of the quality of voice and loudness, speaking softly or loudly etc. Managing these resources along with those other things such as eye communication gestures" (R-7)*.

Theme 5: Recommendations to manage large class of speaking skills

In order to improve the teaching speaking skills in better way the university teachers are advised to be planed and punctual, as respondent number ten said: *"teacher should be planned a teacher should be" (R-10)*, The respondent seven recommended that speaking should not be taught in isolation he said: *"First is to give space to the oral interaction. I see the oral interaction as the frame within the speaking skills. I don't think speaking skills should be taught separately from the listening" (R-7)*.

Large classes have an opportunity to work in collaboration with the students and students with teachers. One of the respondents shared his personal experience of dealing with large classes, he said: *"I used to divide students in groups and they work together and the plan its collaboration its corporation its working together planning it remain positive and students are active as well" (R-10)*. Communication and collaboration between student to student and student to teacher is essential to enhance the learners' performance even in the large class.

Additionally, the other factor which is being highlighted by the candidate is that the management should not enroll than 35 students, as respondent five said: *"I would just recommend that the university can enrollment more students as it can manage a large class while providing facilities so they can divide 70 students class to 35 each" (R-5)*.

Mostly in large classes the teacher centered approach is used where teacher dominates and speaks all the time but it is reported by a interviewee that teacher should provide 60 percent of the time to the student and 40 percent of the time to student which will has better impact on teaching and learning style and it will enhance the involvement of the learners: "*I think that active learning is a two-way mode of communication I really some party 40 60% proportion of speaking both of teacher and students some 40% share should student be contributed into the class so it's an interactive learning in my opinion it's an interactive learning"(R-4)*.

Assessment for the speaking should be on rubrics based because it helped teacher to save time and f rubrics are shared with the students, burden of the assessment will be reduce, as respondent said: *"Like monologue and you were supposed to speak for some topic weather the topic was same to you or there was some difference in them and like in role play as well and should be temporary as well, you need to have check list" (R-6)*.

5.   Discussion
The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers' perception regarding teaching speaking skills in large classes. The study tried to explore the issues and strategies teachers face and implement, the most effective strategies to overcome challenges of teaching speaking skills in large classes, challenges and strategies related to classroom management, assessment and grading (feedback), classroom speaking activities and other communication skills, lesson plans and activities, etc.

The findings reveal that large classes vary from context to context, and teaching speaking skills in large classes provides opportunities for teachers to improve their organizational and large class teaching skills. Large classes boost student's confidence level and prepare them to deal with real life situations, it allows all the students, even the backbenchers to participate. The challenge for most teachers of large classes is to find ways to help each student to maximize his/her learning, "individualization" (Sarwar, 1994). For most of the teachers, the collaborative work and planning of teacher and students have positive impact on students' performance in a large class, as the aim of classroom management is to provide an environment that is conductive and optimum to learning, but it required detailed planning, and professional development courses to deal with large classes smoothly.

Student's diversity in large speaking classes is viewed as an opportunity for most of the language teachers, they use various innovative technologies and code behaviors to reduce noise level. Getting written feedback from their students to cater mixed ability, most of the teachers use teaching material and classroom management advice, i.e. peer work and group work activities, role plays, whole class activities, discussion, and presentations tasks are some of the speaking and communication skills activities, used by most of the teachers in speaking and communication skill classes.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the challenges and possible strategies to overcome in teaching speaking skills to large classes. The results of the findings suggested that teachers took the large class as an opportunity and made possible use of diverse backgrounds in their teaching fields. Additionally, they provide some rubrics to assess speaking skills. The respondent also suggested that assessment of speaking is essential and this must be part of the final assessment. Furthermore, they recommended to the management that the number of enrollments should not exceed sixty numbers of students per class.

6.1. Implication of the Study

Following recommendations are suggested to teachers, institutional management   and policymakers for the improvement of teaching speaking skills in large classes:

Large classes for teaching speaking and communication skills are a bad idea because it is a productive skill and it needs the proper attention, if individual attention is not provided the process of learning may be hampered. Additionally novice teachers are not found ideal to deal with the large speaking classes because they may feel difficulty to deal with large class, if there is a novice teacher he or she should have particular training or professional development courses as "CELTA, ICELT, DELTA, IDLTM, etc." should be explored before dealing the with the students. The next suggestion is that speaking should not be taught in isolation because it is integrated with listening as "Listen, to Respond, to Speak" is a strategy suggested by the experts. If the above recommendations are applied in the daily routine of teaching it will incorporate to manage the classes speaking skills efficiently.

6.2. Directions for Future Research

This study investigates teachers' perceptions of teaching speaking skills in large classes. For future studies, researchers may investigate the opinion of teachers about teaching other skills with reference to speaking, i.e. (receptive skills, teaching reading and listening skills (literal to inferential activities) challenges/ issues and their solutions.

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