Between 1986 and 1992, at annual TESOL conventions as well as at two specialists’ conferences, in Karachi, Pakistan (1991), and Bangkok, Thailand (1992), a group of researchers from various parts of the world presented papers and discussed issues addressing the topic of large classes. The group, initiated by Dick Allwright of Lancaster University, was known as the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project, and one of the organizers, Hywel Coleman, obtained funding from Leeds University to publish several monographs (e.g., LoCastro, 1989). In addition to reporting on country-specific concerns, the publications addressed theoretical issues, including such questions as: How large is too large? When is a group of learners considered large? By whom? For what purposes? Although these questions at first seemed to be relatively easy to answer, we soon realized that we had opened up an area that could not be explained simplistically as the result of institutional or governmental concerns about expenditures for education. The purpose of this report is to survey what I suggest is the main theoretical issue that a large class, more so than small classes, makes salient: How much learning can take place in a class of 300, for example, as opposed to a class of half a dozen learners? In order to begin to answer that question, I draw from research evidence.

Any serious discussion of the effect of class size on learning in a classroom environment has to be informed by a model of the sort
proposed by Gardner (1985) to account for a variety of factors involved in attitudes and motivation in language learning. Class size is at least as complex. Below I review some of the components of a possible model of the interaction of class size and successful language learning.

HOW DOES CLASS SIZE AFFECT LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING?

First, many teachers in all parts of the world from whom at least self-report data (LoCastro, 1989) were collected claimed that having a large class prevented them from doing what they wanted to do to help learners make progress in developing their language proficiency. Yet what class size is large or too large depends to a great extent upon the individual teacher’s perceptions and experiences. Teachers who have taught classes of 6–12 students in what might be described as elite contexts, such as company language programs or private language schools, complain when suddenly faced with a group of 22. Those who have coped with 40 in language learning classes cease to find that number large. As is well known, language education in developing countries is typically carried out in classrooms with 150–300 learners and sometimes more.

Teacher respondents to a questionnaire of the Lancaster-Leeds research group (see LoCastro, 1989, p. 113) generated this list of problems related to class size and language learning, organized into three categories:

Pedagogical

- more difficulties in carrying out speaking, reading, and writing tasks
- difficulties in monitoring work and giving feedback
- problems with individualizing work
- difficulties in setting up communicative tasks
- tendency to avoid activities that are demanding to implement

Management-Related

- correction of large numbers of essays virtually impossible
- pair and group work often cumbersome to execute
- noise level high, affecting neighboring classes
- difficulties in attending to all students during class time
- discipline problems more acute

Affective

- difficulties in learning students’ names
- impossibility of establishing good rapport with students
concerns for weaker students who may get lost
• crowd phenomenon: students’ not listening to teacher and other students
• problems in assessing students’ interests and moods

WHEN IS A CLASS TOO LARGE?

A second important question asks for what purposes a class becomes too large. As the list above suggests, the most likely answer presumably would be that with a group of more than 15, it is difficult to give all the learners chances to practice the target language. And certainly most research in second language acquisition (SLA) since Barnes’ (1976) and Long and Porter’s (1985) early papers have emphasized the role of meaningful interactions in promoting proficiency in the target language. Krashen’s (1982) well-known hypotheses all address the importance of learners’ interacting with the language. More recently, Long’s interaction hypothesis (1996) and Swain’s output hypothesis (1985) are attempts to conceptualize the need for learners to negotiate comprehensible input and the role of their own output in driving their language development. Outside SLA, the work of Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the importance of the zone of proximal development, and the teacher’s role in scaffolding and reconceptualizing learners’ output to push not only language development but also cognitive gains. In addition, there have been major contributions from the field of learning strategies. More and more, the emphasis is on teachers’ training learners to increase their awareness of a variety of learning strategies so that they can achieve their language learning goals.

CLASS SIZE AS A SOCIOCULTURAL VARIABLE

Equally important with regard to effective language learning, if not more so, is the fact that classrooms are social constructions where teachers, learners, dimensions of the local educational philosophy, and more general sociocultural values, beliefs, and expectations all meet. Class size is part of a collection of essentially sociocultural variables that underlie a culture’s educational system. Until recently in many parts of the world, only a relatively small number of individuals from elite groups were formally educated. The worldwide movement toward democratization of education is one of the societal forces that has increased class size and thus is another factor contributing to the issue of developing educational systems that successfully address the needs of all learners irrespective of socioeconomic background.
Clearly, an evaluation of the importance of class size in language education will require comprehensive empirical studies. Such studies might include comparisons of successful and not-so-successful learners in both large and small classes in one sociocultural context. Another related study would encourage teachers, ideally the same teachers, to look at their classroom practices in both types of classes—again in the same cultural environment. Such research studies would bring together colleagues across boundaries, those in the more privileged areas of the world and those who struggle on daily with 150 or more students in classrooms.

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REFERENCES


