

# **Making Large Classes Smaller: the Challenge of Teaching English to Young Learners in Indonesia**

By

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In many areas, especially in developing countries, the standard classes immerge as big issues. Due to the school budget and the growing students' population, some teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching a large class of students. The ideal number of students in one class that has been suggested by Indonesian government is ranged from 20 to 32 students. But in fact some schools cannot fulfill the provision because it will increase their operational budget. Moreover the number of classes in one school is limited it means they have to prepare additional classroom. In some public schools in Indonesia the number of students in one class is around 38 to 40 students with one teacher in a classroom. Therefore sometimes it is difficult for the teacher to be able to understand the characteristic of his/her students and to monitor their achievements well. Some teachers believe that the effectiveness of learning and teaching process is not determined by the number of the students but it is merely depend on the technique that is applied by the teacher to overcome that problem. Other teachers agree that teaching a small group of students is easier, more enjoyable, and less time consuming than teaching a large group. However in teaching English in a big class, just like teaching a small class, teachers must come up with engaging activities that keep all of their students interested and participating with the goal of improving their communication skills. Therefore in this paper I try to offer some techniques that can be applied to cope with teaching English in a large class.

## **Introduction**

In Indonesia, teaching English has been done to secondary school and some primary school, however teaching English to young learners or children is considered as a new phenomenon. Therefore, practically, some problems are faced by the teacher in teaching English for young learners. According to Mustafa (2003) at least there are three problems of teaching English to children: (1) The lack of the English language in real-life situations which would likely involve children in their daily life; (2) the way English words are written as opposed to the way the words are pronounced; (3) there has been a persistent misconception about how children learn including learning a foreign language due to the lack understanding of who the children are.

Another problem immerges when we observe the number of students in the classroom at many schools in Indonesia. In Indonesia, recently a classroom may consist of 30 to 40 students. The Indonesian government has issued a new rule deals with the number of students in one classroom. The government is trying to enhance the education quality in Indonesia by limiting the quota of the number of students. Issued in Permendiknas number 41, 2007, the government suggests that the number of students in every class should be 28 students for Elementary School (SD/MI), and 32 students for the Secondary school and High school. This number is expected to be the ideal number of any subject, so the process of learning and teaching at school will be more effective and all students can achieve the expected

competences. (<http://edukasi.kompasiana.com/2011/12/14/komersialisasi-sekolah/>, Japat, Alex, Komersialisasi Pendidikan)

However 28 to 32 students in a class is not an ideal number of teaching English. National Council of Teachers of English Guidelines of California states that Classes larger than 25 do not give students and teachers the opportunity to engage literary texts through questions, discussion, and writing. While the Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates (ICAS), representing the faculty of the University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges supports that Given the intensive interactions demanded by second language learning, institutions at all three systems should maintain a normal foreign language class size of no more than twenty five students. (<http://coerll.utexas.edu/methods/modules/classroom/02/howmany.php>. Foreign Language Teaching Method: Classroom Management)

The issue about the ideal number of students in Foreign Language Classroom is not easily adopted in Indonesia because of several reasons. Unlike what is suggested in California USA that an EFL classroom must consist of not more than 25 students, as a developing country, Indonesia has many problems deal with the growing of students' population and also budget of education. Creating small classes means increasing the price of education. It is because some schools have to prepare extra classrooms, facilities and also need to recruit some teachers. On the other hand, expecting the government's financial support seems cannot overcome the operational budget and hopping parents' support means raising the price of education for the Indonesian people.

Some experts believe that the number of students in a class is not the only factor which improves the learning achievement. Hanushek (1988) aptly sums up about the class size which turned out as the following: The results are scientifically small. There is much difficulty in merging the small effects with rhetoric about the positive and many profound effects. The effects of reducing class size may or may not be higher on teacher and student work-related conditions which may or may not translate into effects on student learning. We should trust past evidence (literature review and meta-analyses) which are based as investigation of what has been and not necessarily what could be. Jepsen and Rivkin (2002) showed that small classes are equal to big classes. So it can be concluded that the size of the class does small contribution on the students learning. Just like teaching small class, teachers should come with the brilliant ideas of managing their class to gain the best result in teaching and learning.

Teaching large classes or small classes has its own strength and weaknesses. Teaching large classes seems creating many problems because teachers have to control more students and they may have problem with disciplines, but large classes also offer some benefit in team work and solidarity. When there are many children in a class they can share many different ideas and interesting life experiences. This stimulates the children and enlivens those parts of your lesson where children can discuss and learn from each other. During project work, children can learn to share responsibility and help each other. This also brings variety and speeds up the work ( <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/teaching-large-classes>). So teaching young learners in big classes may also stimulate their character development. In reality, it is not very uncommon that some teachers enjoy teaching in large classes, and they feel that if proper strategies are adopted and the classes are well-organised, they may have a greater sense of achievement. Therefore this paper intent to illustrate the challenge of teaching

English to young learners in big classes situation and some strategies which are suitable to be applied.

## English for Young Learners

There are several theories about children development which are relevant to language education, including foreign language. These theories should be considered and applied as the basic theory in implementing English for Young Learners in Indonesia. The theories were brought by Piaget, Vygotsky, and Burnner. Their ideas about human development can be connected to children development because those state about the stages of children cognitive development. In learning English children need social interaction and also need adults' motivation to enhance their learning.

Piaget considers that children are *active learners*. Piaget emphasizes on how young children function in the world that surrounds them, and how this influence their mental development. The child is seen as continually interacting with the world around her/him, solving problem that presented by the environment. It is through taking action to solve the problems that learning occurs. As an action taken to solve the problem children think them through. In this way thought is seem as deriving from action; action is internalized, or carried out mentally in the imagination, and in this way thinking develops. (Cameron, 2001: 2-3)

Meanwhile, Vygotsky concerns *the child as social*. Differ from Piaget, Vygotsky focuses on the social and modern developments which are often labeled as 'sociocultural theory'. The development of child's first language is held to generate a fundamental shift in cognitive development. Language provide a child new opportunities for doing things and for organizing information through the use of language as symbols. (Cameron, 2001: 3)

For Bruner, language is the most important tool for cognitive growth, and he has investigates how adult use language to mediate the world for children and help them to solve problem. Talk that support child in carrying activities has been labeled *scaffolding* and *routines*. (Cameron, 2001: 8)

Considering those theories, Cameron (2001: 19-20) summaries some key learning principles about young children learning a foreign language. Cameron argues that; (i) children actively try to construct meaning; (ii) children need space for language growth; (iii) language in use carries cues to meaning that may not be noticed; (iv) development can be seen as internalizing from social interaction; (v) children's foreign language learning depends on what they experience.

Based on the synthesized from multiple sources, Mustafa (2003) recommends some theoretical generalization about who the children are, and how they learn to ensure optimal EFL learning for young learners. In this essay, we are going to discuss six among the characteristics of children and the way they learn.

**The first**, as part of their development, children are always active exploring their environments (physical, social, informational, ideological) and accumulating knowledge and experiences. Children learn language naturally. **The second**, we can easily observe in our

environment that in their own child-like ways- children of today participate in literate activities in a wider social context. Children's knowledge about literacy artifacts in their environment such as traffic signs, traffic lights, and brand names of their favorite toys and foods. **The third**, unlike adults who can learn very comfortably from parts to whole (such as arranging words to form a sentence and putting sentences into a program), children tend to learn things holistically, in the form of scripts. This tendency is reflected very well in children's play such as playing: "school teachers and students," "a doctor and patients" etc. Children learn best when learning is kept whole, meaningful, interesting, and fun. **The fourth**, when the decision-making is related to their needs the learning becomes meaningful for the children. Given this thinking, children must be given different formats of learning activities so that they can choose based on what they think are important and useful. Children learn best when they make their own choices. Children cannot be expected to sit down and do a certain activity for a long time. The children get bored easily, and they will do what they want to do, they make their own decision. **The fifth**, Children tend to do things and relate to others in a cooperative way unlike adults who can benefit from spirits of competition to boost up their motivation for achievement. One important implication for the context of language instruction in the classroom is that, rather than encouraging children to compete against one another, it would be more productive if they are to work collaboratively towards the achievement of shared goals. Children learn best as a community of learners in a non-competitive environment. **The last**, children learn best by talking and doing in a social context. By using the language for social communication in the group, children acquire the language. In the classroom context, this means that English as a foreign language should be treated as a tool for communication and the children should be encouraged to use the language for many different social purposes by talking and doing things in a social context using English. (Mustafa, 2003)

### Advantages and Challenges of Teaching Large Classes

T Zhichang ( <http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2001/xu.html>) after observing some classes in China, argues that teaching English in large classes is presently still not being preferred by most teachers. In other words, many teachers teach in large classes, because they have to take it. As the result, they take for granted that many problems arise along with the increase in class size. On the one hand, teaching in large classes can reasonably save human and material resources to ease the problems caused by the lack of teaching staff and equipment and classrooms, schools' financial problem etc. On the other hand, many improvements in teaching methodologies can be applied to large classes teaching just as well as to small classes. The large size of a class should not be an excuse of not improving on the traditional methods or not trying various other methods apart from the traditional ones. In fact, not all students, including teachers in China are against the learning and teaching in large classes. As long as the teachers know the characteristics of the teaching in large classes, and adjust what and how they teach accordingly, they can make their teaching just as effective as small classes.

Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) wrote in their article *Teacher Attitudes and Change Implementation* that "what worries her (a Greek language teacher), however, is the size of the class since she believes that as soon as the number of groups passes a certain number, it is difficult to 'control what happens'." Phil Wankat (in Felder 1997) went even further by saying that "anything you can do in a large class you can do better in a small one".

However, not all English teachers think that class size matters. Such teachers would say that good teaching is good teaching: what holds true for small classes also holds true for large ones. Felder (1997) holds that "there are ways to make large classes almost as effective as their smaller counterparts." As Felder (1997) stated that "the instructor's satisfaction may be even greater in the large classes: after all, many professors can teach 15 students effectively, but when you do it with 100 or more you know you've really accomplished something." Teaching large classes may offer different problem compare to teaching small classes but when a teacher can overcome the problem and at the same time improving the learning quality. It becomes great revolution in the teaching and learning era.

In every teaching process, there will be advantages and challenge regardless to the number of the classes (large or small). A professional, teacher should have been recognized his/her class well to decide the appropriate technique. A large class has its own unique characteristics.

Hayes (1997) summarizes the problems with teaching in large classes as the following: (i) Discomfort: Many teachers are worried by the physical constraints imposed by large numbers in confined classrooms. They feel unable to promote student interaction, since there is no room to move about. Some teachers also feel that teaching in large classes is physically very wearing. (ii) Control: Teachers are often worried by the discipline aspects of large classes. They feel they are unable to control what is happening, and that the classes become too noisy. (iii) Individual attention: Many teachers are concerned that they are neglecting the needs of their students as individuals. (iv) Evaluation: Teachers feel a responsibility for checking all of their students' work, and are worried if they cannot do so. (v) Learning effectiveness: All teachers want their students to learn English. They are understandably worried if they do not know who is learning what.

It's difficult to keep good discipline going in a large class. Since there are many students in one class, too much noise cannot be avoided. Some students may be busy chatting and doing their business which is not related to the topic of the lesson. ATeacher have to provide for more children of different ages and different abilities, wanting to learn different things at different speeds and in different ways. The teacher cannot easily give each child the individual attention they need and understand individual character.He/she may not have enough books or teaching and learning aids. Besides the challenge which seems to be huge problems for some teachers, large classes offer interesting phenomena. There are some advantages of teaching in a large class. When there are many children in a class they can share many different ideas and interesting life experiences. This stimulates the children and enlivens those parts of your lesson where children can discuss and learn from each other. During project work, children can learn to share responsibility and help each other. This also brings variety and speeds up the work. (<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/teaching-large-classes>)

Base on the research finding done by Zhichang(<http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2001/xu.html> ) Despite the many problems with learning English in large classes, about 77.1% of the respondents to the questionnaire stated that the differences of learning English in large and small classes are not significant. The learning environment of the large class is "safe" and "relaxing". In the large class, students are very active, but in the small class, everyone keeps silent. In the large class, every time a

question is raised by the teacher, there are always some students who can come up with some answers. There is a sense of competition in the large class. The atmosphere in the large class is relatively better and more lively. Students from different small classes are secretly competing with one another, which enhances learning, but in a large class students are competing as groups. Learning in a large class is an interesting and novel experience for some students. They often find new friends, because there are many students in the class.

### **Strategies for Coping with Large Classes**

Considering that managing large classes can be very stressful, the teacher will need extra preparation. He/she can find ways to relax before class so that he/she don't feel anxious. Never attempt to prepare a lesson in the morning, right before class and if necessary always have a water bottle handy. The most necessary is that the teacher has to prepare the activities that going to be applied for the students. It is also important always having an extra activity on hand in case something doesn't go as you expect it to.

The biggest problem in managing the large class probably deals with controlling the students. A teacher will need extra energy to monitor the students and he/she sometime need to be very discipline. Large classes can become out of hand when students are working in pairs or groups. At times the teacher may feel more like a disciplinarian than a teacher. To develop good discipline in a large class, teacher needs to establish the rules. Establishing a code of behavior that is created by teacher and learners together will state clear basic rules of conduct that learners understand, such as, they have to work quietly; they may talk, but not loudly and so on. When the class turns to be a huge crowd, shouting 'be quite' to get their attention sometimes does not work. At this time a teacher need to calm down to get his/himself in control, and think another way to get the students in control like asking them to raise their hand if they can hear him.

Dividing the class into group can be one of alternatives in helping teacher in managing the large class. How can teachers use group work to help learning in a large class? In a large class, children pairs and groups can help each other and learn from each other. They don't get bored listening to teacher talk. Teachers of large classes can try different strategies to organize the groups to suit the children's abilities for example mixed-ability groups or same-ability group. Harmer (2007a: 177-178) supports that pair work and group work will give a very valuable experience for the students since the teacher can maximize the students' participation in every activities. It is very effective in managing a class with large number of students where it is difficult for the teacher to make contact with every students and it is difficult for the students to receive individual attention.

Group work also can arose the students' solidarity as they work and help each other. Harmer (2007b: 166) describes the advantages of groupwork as follows; Groupwork dramatically increases the number of talking opportunities for individual students. Because there are more than two people in the group, personal relationship are usually less problematic; there is also a greater chance of different opinions and varied contribution. It encourages broader skill of cooperation and negotiation and it more private than working in front of the class. It promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to make their own decision in the group without being told what to do by the teacher. Although we do not wish any individuals in group to be passive, nevertheless some students can choose their level of participation.

To monitor the groups, the teacher sometimes needs to move around the classroom to see what progress learners are making and what problems are coming up. S/he can give advice, encouragement and extra individual help where it is needed. The teacher can also find help from the student. She/he can give a chance for the capable students to be the leader of the group and help other students. Sometimes a teacher needs to step out from the group crowd and lead the class from the front. This action will provide the students a space to work on their own and give them responsibility in maintaining their learning process and the teacher can observe the class as a whole organization.

A Classroom is a limited space for energetic activities such as role-playing. Using the environment outside the classroom offers a new tempting experience. School gardens, lobbies, or halls, offer different space when children get noisy or bored, and helps to reduce overcrowding. Remember that when the teacher works with some groups inside the classroom while the other groups are working outside (use different tasks or the same task). Setting up outdoor activities clearly and carefully and monitoring them is required, because some students may be very active. If it is necessary appointing responsible group leaders who can help maintain discipline. They can also give out and take in work for the groups, and explain what groups must do.

When observing the students work, the teacher to summarize the process, which students are working which are not working. Using a teacher's notebook to take notes while you are monitoring pair or group learning, will help the teacher in summarizing and assessing the process of learning. Finally use the teacher's note to review common errors as a whole group after an activity is completed. The notes can be used as a teacher's reflection, what success and what is fail in a large class and make revision on the next section.

## **Conclusion and Suggestion**

Most teachers agree that teaching a small group of students is easier, more enjoyable, and less time consuming than teaching a large group. Unfortunately, due to budgets, space, or lack of teachers, many ESL schools only offer large classes. Considering that young learners are active learners and they need to socialize and interact with others in learning language, so teachers should design a suitable class for them. The Indonesian government suggests that the number of students in every class should be 28 students for Elementary School (SD/MI), and 32 students for the Secondary school and High school, yet this is not an ideal number for a Language class. In spite of the difficulties, large classes offer tempting experience in managing class organization. Before coming to the class, teachers need to prepare the materials and activities for the students; they need to establish the rules to control the students. Dividing the class into group can be one of alternatives in helping teacher in managing the large class. It is very effective in managing a class with large number of students where it is difficult for the teacher to make contact with every students and it is difficult for the students to receive individual attention. Teachers' notes are very valuable for making summaries of the classes' achievement and for making better improvements in the future classes.

So there is no reason for teachers of giving up to large classes and not improving their teaching techniques. Teachers should see large classes as challenges and when they success in improving the quality of students' learning progress, it will become great satisfactions of all

teachers. Many professors can teach 15 students effectively, but when you do it with 100 or more you know you've really accomplished something. The bigger the class, the better it will be.



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