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### Teaching Large Classes: What Teachers Say and Do?

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#### Abstract

Class size is often considered as one of the crucial factors that determines the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the classroom setting. In Nepal, large classes are very common in rural areas or even in urban areas. This study presents the findings of an empirical study on the challenges of teaching in large classes and how teachers are dealing with these challenges in Nepal. The main aim of this article is to explore the challenges of teaching in large classes and to find out the strategies they can be adapted to overcome these problems. The research was conducted by including 10 teachers teaching large classes, following a qualitative research design with a judgmental, non-random sampling procedure. Interviews and classroom observations were taken as the main research tools for the data collection. The research findings are divided into two categories: the challenges of teaching in large classes and how they deal with the large classes. Mainly, teachers found student participation, classroom management, disciplinary issues, and individual feedback as the main problems, and to deal with these problems, they explored various strategies like grouping students, changing seats of students, setting a code of conduct, and using alternative ways of giving feedback.

**Keywords:** Large class, teaching challenges, effective teaching, teaching strategies

#### Introduction

Teaching is the art of persuading others to learn something by persuading them on a specific subject. Simply speaking, teaching and learning are affected by factors like the environment, the teacher's or students' background, teaching methods, class size, and many more. My study focuses on class size or the number of students in a particular class. The number of students in a class may vary from country to country, context to context, or

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discipline to discipline. Todd (2006) states that teaching English in large classes is a common phenomenon all over the world, especially in developing countries. For many teachers, large class size is one of the biggest challenges in their work. So, it can be said that no fixed number of students determines whether the classes are large or small. According to Hayes (1997), no fixed number of students shapes a large class as teachers' perceptions of large classes differ from one context to another. Based on this definition, it can be said that the number doesn't matter, but how the teacher perceives it matters. In some cultures, more than 20 are considered large, while in another, more than 100 are considered large. Therefore, it can be said that teachers' perception determines the class size. Hess (2001) believes a class is considered "large" if it has 30 students or more. In Saudi Arabia, a class of 45 students is considered to be large, while in some Far East countries, such as Japan, China, Pakistan, and India, a class of 80 students or more is considered to be large. According to Ur (1996), the exact number is unimportant; what matters is how you, the teacher, perceive class size in your particular situation. Similarly, Baker and Westrup (2000) suggest that large classes can have any number of students if the teacher observes that there are too many students for them to make progress.

In another context, Mulryan-Kyne (2010) offers a different view and says that the number of students depends on the nature of courses, resources, and facilities available. If a teacher is teaching history, 50 to 100 can be adjusted (depending on the room size), but the smaller the better for teaching science. Similarly, if the resources or facilities are adjustable, then the number does not matter. In the same way, Jungic and Kent (2006) further point out that large classes are those with more than two hundred students in a university lecture room. This definition in consonant with Mulryan-Kyne supports the nature of the course and facilities that determine the class size. Brown (2001) believed an ideal class should have no more than 12 students. In other words, a class should be big enough to offer variety and allow interaction but small enough to provide students with opportunities for participating and receiving individual attention. According to his definition, twelve students in a class is an ideal class. . Any language class with more than 20 students is not regarded as good because learners cannot get opportunities to interact with each other, so their speaking skills may not be improved. According to Onwu (1999), a large class is "one where the majority of characteristics and conditions present themselves as inter-related and collective constraints that impede meaningful teaching and learning." Based on this definition, we can say the number of students can influence that teaching and learning because of the lack of proper space in the room, lack of time for individual treatment, excessive workload, lack of creativity, and limited opportunities.

Nepal is a multilingual, multicultural, and underdeveloped country with many challenges in teaching and learning. Among various challenges, the number of students in a class is also the most influential factor in teaching. If one talks about the number of students in a single class, there is variance depending on various situations. Generally, the number ranges from fifty to a hundred in a class which is a very common situation in the context of Nepal. If more than 50 students are in a class, how effectively can a teacher deliver his/her content by making every student active and participatory? It is a challenging job for either a novice or an experienced teacher. A single teacher has to deal with all students within forty-five minutes of a class. One can imagine how a teacher could effectively get his or her job done in such a situation. Within 45 minutes, the teacher has to teach the content, check each student's homework, take attendance, complete the course on time, and ensure every student learns the course as a whole. So, here the main focus of my study is on how Nepalese teachers are dealing with such a challenging job. What problems do they encounter while dealing with such large classes? The main objective of the study was to explore the challenges faced by the teachers while dealing with large classes. Similarly, it also aimed to find out the strategies teachers adapt to overcome these problems.

### **Review of related literature**

Many teachers find large classes a teaching challenge, and many researchers find it one of the research sites. They believe that it hinders the quality of education (Hattie, 2005; Pedder, 2006), depriving students of many opportunities. Zhang (2008) has pointed out that in a large class, three main problems occur while teaching: disciplinary issues, second, students' and teachers' weary eyes, and third, efficient learning. Based on his findings, in a large class, they may get a chance to make noise, and teachers cannot identify who is doing what. Similarly, learning cannot be so effective because the teacher cannot deal with everyone's problems in a limited time.

In the same way, Yu (2004) also found similar kinds of findings in her study on college students as well as studying in large classes. In her findings, individuals' variants are neglected, and anxiety is prevalent in the class. Similarly, limited time may deprive students of practicing their target content, so they may not develop appropriate competency in a particular subject or content. Harmer (2000) has also expressed similar views regarding the problems of large classes. He has noticed that large classes bring difficulties to the teaching and learning process. Concluding his view, we can say that both teachers and learners find it challenging to get appropriate exposure and create effective, creative classes.

Similarly, classroom management is also one of the greatest problems, in his view. Coleman's (1989) research has pointed out that large classes are regarded as troublesome by

the instructors. Exley and Dennick (2004) and Bligh (2000) expressed that when teachers encounter large classes, they use the lecture method for instructing students rather than engaging themselves in other teaching strategies that promote discussion, critical thinking, or change attitudes or behavioral skills. This study has also pointed out that large classes force teachers to use traditional teaching methods because of limited space and time. Learners can't be creative, and teachers must be more active than students in the classroom. From the above literature review, we can say that there are many challenges to teaching in large classes.

Having many students in the class may have both positive and negative effects. It has many more problems than benefits. There are a few benefits to having large classes, like more opportunities for the competition can be had if there are many students in the class; it also helps students build confidence while facing the mass, many students mean many opportunities for sharing; and finally, it creates a cooperative environment in the classroom. Compared to the benefits, there are many challenges to teaching in a large class. In Coleman's (1989) view, large classes are troublesome, problematic, and difficult compared to small classes. Various researches in South Africa have pointed out that class size plays a vital role in the success or failure of teaching and learning for lecturers and students (Papo, 1999). Some of the most common comments teachers have are: there is no communication; the class is out of control, lack of individual attention, difficulty in setting up effective group activities, disciplinary problems, noise in the classroom, evaluating students' performance, and so on. These are the common problems faced by most teachers or students in a large class. Al-Jarf's (2006, p. 24) has pointed out that "due to the size of the class, they do not have enough time to pay attention to each and give every student a chance to speak and participate."

Similarly, Kennedy & Kennedy (1996) also found a similar view regarding class size and said that it is tough to tackle all kinds of problems that occur in the class if the number exceeds a specific number. In Al-Jarf's (2006) study, he found that large class sizes inhibit small group activities and individualized instruction because of the noise level and lack of space in the classroom. Similarly, LoCastro (1989) proposes three kinds of problems based on empirical research in Japan. They are pedagogical, management-related, and affective problems. Hayes (1997) pointed out five categories of problems associated with dealing with large classes, i.e. discomfort caused by physical constraints, control problems, lack of individual attention, difficulty in evaluation, and problems associated with charging for learning effectiveness. In the same way, Yang (2008) identified two types of issues: difficulties attending to each student, especially for lower-achieving students, and students' low degree of participation. From the above discussion, we can enumerate some common challenges associated with teaching in large classes: There is a lack of interaction among

the students, less attention is given to the student's individualistic problems, disciplinary problems can be higher in large classes, and teaching and learning may not be as effective if the teacher is not well trained, and students may not be motivated to be active in the classroom.

## **Methodology**

The study was designed under the theoretical insights of constructivism, which advocates for subjective and multiple realities of a social phenomenon. A qualitative research approach was used to explore the subjective views of teachers regarding the challenges of teaching in a large class and the strategies they apply to cope with these challenges. Since qualitative research is used to explore the “why” and “how” of the phenomenon for a deeper understanding (Kemperaj & Chavan, 2013), it deliberately employs a small-purposeful sampling strategy to collect the relevant data for the in-depth studies (Maxwell, 2012). The subjects in this study were ten teachers from 10 different schools in Kanchanpur district, Nepal, who were dealing with the classes, out of which five were experienced teachers who have spent more than 15 years in teaching fields, and five were novice teachers who have less than 2 years' experience in the field of teaching. All the participants were selected based on purposive judgmental sampling in terms of their interest or readiness to give a response. For data collection, I administered a questionnaire, which mainly focused on the challenges of teaching in a large class and how they were dealing with these challenges. In the same way, I used a semi-structured interview protocol to get their opinions on challenges and their solutions. For data collection, I requested teachers' time, shared my study purpose, and requested that they fill out a questionnaire. After returning the questionnaire, I requested an interview with them and interviewed them for a maximum of 1 hour each. Afterward, the interview was transcribed, and the themes were derived using a thematic approach. Similarly, I thematized the questionnaire and made some common themes from both sources of information for the analysis. As theoretical lens, I have used constructivism as the main theory. Constructivism believes that learning can be socially, culturally and individually constructed.

In this study I tried to maintain quality standard by using various tools of quality standards like: mainly trustworthiness. To maintain trustworthiness I involved in prolong engagement in interviewing the participants. I also used peer debriefing, and audit trail to increase the trustworthiness in this study. After selecting the subjects of the study, I explained the purpose of my study and requested them to fill the consent form and assured them regarding the confidentiality of the information.

## Findings of the study

Data collected from both the sources were combined and developed some common themes, which were categorized into two groups: Further analysis and interpretation of the challenges of teaching in large classes, as well as the strategies used by teachers to overcome them, are discussed below:

### The challenges of teaching in a large class

The first objective of the study was to explore challenges teachers encounter while teaching in a large class. On the basis of their responses, the following themes were derived for further analysis:

**Participation of students.** This is the main challenge almost all teachers face in large classes. Most teachers shared that teachers are quite active in the classroom and students need to just listen to what the teacher says because it is impossible to make everyone speak in a large class. Similarly, a teacher [T5] stated, “In my class, there are 60 students, and I have 45 minutes for my class; how can I involve all of the students in the learning activities in this situation?” “In this way, it was found that students’ participation is very low, and there is a one-way transfer of knowledge in the large classes.

**Classroom management.** In a large class, with limited space for movement in the class, another problem most the teachers face. According to their responses, they had to stay in front of the class and give lectures from the rostrum, and they could not observe students’ activities around the class. One of the participants reported, “We always *have a row and column seating arrangement because benches are fixed in the class, and you cannot move them* [T12].” “*It is like delivering a speech by the political leaders in our class,*” said another participant [T2]. It was tough to implement varied seating management in the large class due to a large number of students and the management of furniture in the classroom. From their responses, it could be stated that classroom management or seating arrangement is another challenge for the teachers of large classes.

**Disciplinary problem.** The majority of the teachers believe that it is tough to control students in large classes; they do nonsense activities at the back of the class, and we cannot see what they are doing. A teacher [T7] said, “*Backbenchers are problematic. They become busy gossiping with their friends and disturbing others. When I try to find out who is speaking, then nobody speaks.*” Teasing girls and making noise at the back of the class was found to be a common problem for every teacher. In a similar context, a teacher shared, “*It is very difficult to remember the names of all the students in such a large class, and it becomes difficult to control the noise by calling their names* [T4].” When there is noise in the class, it

distracts the concentration of other students and teachers too; and it becomes difficult for the teacher to give an exact idea about the topic. In a large class, the teacher must shout at a high pitch to get every student to listen to and reduce noise from the class, which may result in a throat problem for the teacher.

**Individual feedback.** According to the participants, providing individual feedback in a large class is almost impossible. In a group of 60–80 students, it becomes challenging to deal with individual students, and learning cannot be so effective if they do not get feedback on their learning or the task. *“It is very difficult to remember the names of every student in the class; how is it possible to treat individual students within a short time in class?”* as argued by another teacher [T9]. Checking homework is another problem in large classes. Similarly, a teacher [T1] said, *“Within 45 minutes, we must give homework and check homework correctly every day. In this situation, how can we do the task?”* In the Nepalese context, it is almost mandatory to provide homework to the students every day, which principals and parents expect, but checking homework correctly is a really very problematic task in a large class situation. In a similar context, a teacher [T10] during the interview said, *“... Our guardians think that if a teacher checks and gives homework, then the teacher has taught, and if not, the teacher has not taught.” Some guardians come with the issue of not checking homework properly, and others come with not giving homework. So, you can imagine how we can check the homework of 80 students within 45 minutes and even if the teacher has to complete the course on time also. Is it possible...? “*

Some of the teachers also pointed out that the heterogeneity of the class is also a problematic situation in the Nepalese context. Students from different linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds and learning abilities can be found in the same class. They have different expectations, making it difficult to fulfill all their needs and expectations.

### **Strategies adopted by the teachers to overcome these problems**

The second part of the study focused on what strategies teachers follow to solve these problems, and their responses are thematized into the following groups for the analysis and interpretation:

**Grouping students.** To increase student participation, teachers grouped students based on their seating arrangement and assigned them a task to be performed in a group. They could not manage different seating arrangements in their class, and they divided students into groups sitting on benches. A teacher [T6] shared, *“I group students based on benches and assign a student a group leader and ask them to discuss the given topic. Finally, some group leaders randomly shared their group discussions.* Some of the teachers also reported that they primarily focus on backbenchers because most of the students sitting at the

back of the class are poor at studying or do not do homework. They ask questions randomly in the class to make students aware of the topic of the class discussion.

**Seating arrangement.** To increase students' participation, some teachers are changing students' seats every day so that every student can be at the front and back of the class, turn-wise. *If students have a fixed seat in the classroom, the front benchers can only participate in the discussion and learning, but the back benchers remain passive.* “, a teacher shares [T4]. Shaping seats into various forms is not possible in such a class. Therefore, teachers are found to be changing the seats of students going from the front to the back in a cyclic way every day. According to them, students feel excited about changing seats every day because they get a new experience of sitting in different corners of the class. From the participants' responses, it was also found that they manage seating arrangements based on the learning ability, a teacher [T5] said, “*I mix up talent and poor students while sitting in the classroom because less talented students may benefit from the talented ones during the class.*” Mixing students of different abilities may be more beneficial for the poor students while dictating the notes, learning any grammatical patterns, or doing exercises from the textbooks.

**Setting code of conduct.** To overcome the disciplinary problems, many teachers set the disciplinary code of conduct by discussing it with students and pasting it on the front of the classroom wall. One teacher [T8] said, “*Setting a code of conduct helped me a lot to control the undesired activities of students in the classroom.*” According to them, students and teachers jointly set some disciplinary rules, and if any students violate those rules, they are penalized. Therefore, nobody dares violate the classroom code of conduct because they have agreed on it previously. They have a set monetary punishment system and the fund collected from punishment is usually spent on student welfare tasks in the school. Some teachers appointed a student as the discipline in-charge (DI), who observes other students' nonsense behavior and reports it to the teacher for punishment.

Regarding nominating DI, a teacher shared an interesting idea: “*I nominate the DI of the class who mainly disturbs the class. From that day, I found my class very comfortable [T6].*” Different teachers were found to use other techniques to control students from doing nonsense activities.

**Overall feedback.** It is almost impossible to provide individual feedback in a group of more than 50 students in a class, so participants of my study found various strategies to provide feedback to the students in the large class. Some teachers used to get help from talented students to help less gifted students. A participant [T3] reported, “*I use some 4/5 talent students to help those with problems with the subject matter. My understanding of*



talent students also becomes stronger while teaching others in the class.” Some teachers also said that they use a peer-to-peer feedback system. This technique was more beneficial for checking homework, and students found it very enjoyable when they were involved in their friends’ homework. One of the participants [T5] stated, “I ask every student to exchange their home assignment with the students sitting next to each other and give them four minutes to check the assignment and give feedback.” Some of the participants responded that they use the “key point method” of checking homework. They write possible answers to the home assignment and ask students for self-evaluation and correction. Some teachers discovered that using a random nomination and voluntary method of dealing with homework was also effective. They randomly ask some students to read their assignments and make the necessary corrections to their tasks. They invite others to make similar corrections if there are any.

## **Discussion**

This study found that teachers encounter four types of problems when teaching in a large class, i.e., student participation, classroom management, disciplinary issues, and individual feedback. In a similar situation, LoCastro (1998) conducted empirical research in Japan and found pedagogical, management, and affective problems. Like LoCastro, this study also explored similar problems, except affective ones. In the same way, Hayes (1997) also found five problems with large classes, like physical constraints, individual disciplinary attention, and difficulty in evaluating learning effectiveness. Hayes’ problems are also more similar to those in this study, but this study has not revealed the evaluation problem. The present study found more focused on student participation and individual feedback than in the case of Yang (2008), who has also explored two types of problems in large classes: attending to each individual and a low degree of student participation. In this way, it can be said that large classes are problematic all over the world, and the problems encountered by Nepalese English teachers and teachers from all over the world are similar.

The second part of the study focused on the strategies adopted to cope with the above problems. The findings of this study pointed out four major strategies adopted by the teachers in large Nepalese classes: grouping students’ bench-wise, changing students’ seats every day, setting codes of conduct, and using various techniques of providing feedback. In the book by Shamim et al. (2007), a series of strategies are discussed to deal with large classes, such as: reducing noise, establishing ground checking rules, giving individual reminders, and so on. The findings of this study also pointed to similar strategies, except for reducing the noise strategy. Similarly, Yang (2008) emphasized grouping students for teaching in a large class, whereas Sun (2008) focused on interactive teaching techniques

in a large class. Sun's findings are different than this present research because the role of interaction was not pointed out in this study. Other researchers, like Wang and Wang (2003), found multi-media technology to be the best technique for dealing with large classes, which is lacking in this study.

Using the theoretical lens; constructivism, it can be said that teachers tried to explore the techniques of dealing with the large classes individually, as the constructivism believes that knowledge is socially and individually constructed. As this theory believes that each knowledge is personal and individuals have distinctive point of view so from various subjects different types of techniques were explored. Similarly, constructivism believes that learning is an active process so that learners need to be actively involved in learning activities; here in this study also I found teachers were trying to explore the techniques of solving the problems. It also believes that knowledge is socially constructed by the discussion among the learners but in this study teachers were not found discussing in the group to find out the solutions of the problem.

## **Conclusions**

The findings of the study point out that teachers are facing mainly four kinds of problems: students' participation, classroom management, disciplinary issues, and providing individual feedback to the students. For effective teaching and learning, student participation is regarded as the most important factor, but it is problematic in a large class. Similarly, classroom noise, disciplinary problems, and distracting factors in the classroom were found to be serious problems in large classes. Different scholars suggested different seating arrangements for effective teaching, but it was found troublesome for the large class. Individual feedback is another important component of productive teaching, lacking in large classes, particularly in the Nepalese context.

Teachers in Nepal are actively seeking various alternative ways of coping with these problems. So, large class teachers found different strategies to overcome the abovementioned problems. They are grouping students, changing students' seats every day, setting a code of conduct, and alternative ways of giving feedback. From the participants' responses, it was found that despite the mass of students, teachers found alternative ways of teaching to make teaching and learning more active, alive, and effective.

From the research, it can be concluded that there are so many challenges to teaching in large classes. Still, some of the challenges the teachers face are engaging students or classroom interaction, classroom management, dealing with homework, assessing students' performance, maintaining discipline in the classroom, giving individual feedback, or remembering the name of an individual student, and so many others. From the research

findings, it was also found that teachers were applying unique or locally based techniques to overcome these problems. Some teachers used talented students as their assistants to help in the classroom. Peer correction was found to be quite a common technique for dealing with homework and assessing students. It can also be concluded that individual feedback is very difficult in the class.

Similarly, group work, role play, and advanced seating arrangements are also quite uncommon in their classes. It was found that the lecture method or traditional teaching method is frequently used in classes. In conclusion, it can be said that large classes are challenging not only for the teachers but also for the students. Students cannot get much exposure or they cannot concentrate on the content due to the noise in the classroom, and teachers cannot give as much as they wish to give to the students. Therefore, teaching and learning cannot become effective in large classes.

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