

Teachers' Perspective of Teaching Literature in Large Classes: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

This study investigates Pakistani teachers' perceptions on challenges faced and strategies used while teaching English literature in large classes at a public sector university in Pakistan. Data for this study was collected from 10 teachers of literature, including men and women as well as novice and experienced teachers, through semi-structured interviews. The study has applied a qualitative mode of inquiry employing Thematic Analysis. The key arguments based on findings of this study reveal that teaching literature in large classes has many challenges especially in public-sector university in a developing country like Pakistan. Participants in the study talked about lack of resources, lack of engagement and student anonymity as main problems related to teaching and learning literature in a large class setting. The experiences of novice and experienced teachers differ from each other as younger teachers adopt more engaging activities and use social media and technology to help student engagement.

Keywords: English literature, Higher education, Large classes, Pakistani teachers.

1. Introduction

The effects of varying class size on the teaching-learning process have been a matter of debate for almost a century now. Large class size is a challenge faced by many teachers and learners around the world and is a particular issue in many developing countries where teacher recruitment has not kept pace with rapid increases in school enrolments. Large classes at tertiary level are not a new phenomenon and in many countries, including France, Holland, Italy and the USA, classes of between 300 and 1000 can be found

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(Biggs 1999). Noticing this increase in number each year, it can be assumed that this ratio would remain steady in the future. With the significant increase of enrolment of students in educational institutes, teaching large classes has been under constant focus since the last few decades among educators and practitioners. Due to this increase in number, educational institutes put unavoidable insistence on teachers to cope with the situation with very productive results. Thus the strict accountability and assurance of quality education is made more complicated with increasing ratio. However, at the same time it is more challenging than teaching small numbered students classes. Although many studies have been conducted in this area, there is limited research in Pakistan, especially in relation to the literature classroom and from the teachers' perspective. In this paper, we aim to focus on Pakistani teachers' experience of teaching English literature in large classes with a special focus on the challenges they face and the strategies they employ in overcoming the challenges. Our main research questions, therefore, are:

- (i) What are the challenges faced by teachers of English literature while teaching in large classes?
- (ii) What strategies do teachers employ to overcome the challenges while teaching in large literature classes?

2. Literature Review

A number of studies have been conducted across the globe from different perspectives declaring challenges of teaching large classes and proposing effective strategies to the issues associated with this factor. The issue of large class pedagogy is a global issue; as Hornsby and Osman (2014) put it "experiences of developing and developed country higher education environments are similar substantively. That is, both types of environments struggle to deal with diversity in student approaches to learning, and how to promote student engagement and higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking".

Hornsby and Osman (2014) contribute to the debate of large class pedagogy by arguing that the large class is a great obstacle in the development of students' critical and cognitive ability. They further contend that quality education and student learning are intertwined concepts that are under threat in large class environments. Having said that large classes are not as

productive as expected, they also point out that large classes do hold some promise and opportunities for innovation in support of student learning. Shamim and Kuchah (2016, p. 527) also point out that there are various challenges associated with large class teaching including “learners' engagement and interaction, high noise level and heterogeneous classes”. They emphasize the need for context-specific teacher training that focuses on skills needed to teach in large classes.

Teaching large classes has its limitations but some researchers also point out strategies to be used and even advantages of large classes. Carbon (1998) discusses the limitations of teaching in large classes. She insists on creating an influential impression on breaking the ice day, insists on remembering students' names, feels as if the class is small, or provokes students' output. Focusing on the lecture method, the book provides input on useful points regarding organizing and communicating thoughts to make the lecture fully understandable. She puts great stress on making the lecture effective with storytelling tools. Carpenter (2006) investigates the effectiveness of five commonly-used teaching methods for large classes, which are, lecture, lecture/discussion combination, jigsaw, case study, and team project. The results of his research suggest that students should be highly involved as active members during the teaching and learning process. Mulryan-Kyne (2010) also emphasizes that serious attention needs to be given to finding creative ways of dealing with some of the specific challenges, especially those related to levels of interaction and feedback. Lawrence (2019) says teachers should focus on student engagement and critical thinking in order to make the most of large class situations. Wilsman (2018) presents various strategies to be adopted to help students engage in large classes. He suggests activities such as think-pair-share to involve students in small group discussions and move them gradually to a bigger audience. He also acknowledges logistic issues such as taking attendance and suggests establishing rules regarding those in the class in order to avoid taking too much time. He also emphasizes integrating technology into the classroom,

for example, students can share their questions and ideas on Twitter, as that helps students engage in virtual space as well.

Exeter, Ameratunga, Ratima, Morton, Dickson, Hsu, & Jackson (2010) studied students' participation in large classes from teachers' perspectives. Adopting semi-structured interviews with six-course coordinators at a university in New Zealand, they identified the challenges that occur when the class size is large. The findings declare that students' can be engaged in a large class using the same techniques associated with small classes. Harfitt (2012) however, observed the same teachers in a large class and small class settings and noticed subtle differences. It is easier for teachers to know all the students and prepare and facilitate activities involving group work in large classes. Even though teachers perceived that they planned for both classes in the same way but the challenges experienced in large classes were different.

Various researchers have provided effective teaching methods and models for teaching in large classes. Lynch and Pappas (2017) have developed a model based on their own experience of teaching in large classes. Their model focuses on getting help from various available institutional resources such as teaching assistants, writing skills centers, graders, students mentoring among others. Mgeni (2013) also studied teachers' perception of effective teaching methods for large classes at a university. Using questionnaires, the participants were asked to identify the challenges they face in large classes and how they cope with the challenges. The majority of the teachers declared the lecture/discussion method as the most effective (60%). The team project was perceived to be less effective than lecture/discussion methods. The problem solving and case study methods were perceived to be the least effective, (10%) and (6%), respectively. While concerning the questions about the challenges faced by teachers in large classes they asserted that the major problem is to get students to participate in a large class. Other challenges identified were of keeping students attentive, the issue of assessment, and identifying weak students. The most frequent recommendation from the teachers on how to deal with these challenges included dividing classes into smaller groups so that active learning could be implemented.

Maringe and Sing's study (2014) explores eight pedagogical ways to deal with the issues of class size and diversity that can help increase students' participation and engagement in increasingly large classes at the university level. They suggest creating buzz groups, increasing students' input time, and giving readings prior to the class to ensure student participation and engagement. Ghazali et al. (2009) looked into English as a second language learners' perceptions on dealing with literary texts in large classes. The students' perceptions showed that teachers spent most of the teaching time explaining the various elements of the work such as plot, theme, characters, etc whereas the students were more interested in learner-centered activities such as being involved in group work or voicing their own opinions and ideas.

Hence it can be concluded that the research on teaching large classes and its challenges and the potential solutions to those challenges have been enormously conducted. So far its problems are concerned they are only addressed at the general level not indicating any particular discipline. This paper can be considered innovative in terms of its association with a particular discipline which is literature. Focusing on large classes of literature, we have tried to investigate how far the teaching-learning process can be made effective with the issue of lack of provision of adequate and appropriate resources.

3. Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative design. A qualitative study was chosen in order to get in-depth data (Bryman, 2012). Data was collected from ten English literature teachers at a public sector university in Sindh, Pakistan. The semi-structured interview schedule was created in accordance with the framework of Kallio et al. (2016). Literature review guided the initial interview protocol. This was then piloted by the researchers by interviewing each other. As there were not many changes after the pilot interview, we decided to include our own interviews in the data as well. The final interview schedule was used on eight more teachers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore rich data regarding participants' views and experiences of teaching literature in large classes at a public university. The interview covered many aspects of teaching literature in large classes some more related to challenges and strategies to cope up with those challenges. The participants talked about the challenges they face and the tactics they employ to overcome those challenges while teaching literature in large classes.

Size, representativeness, access, and sampling technique used were the factors that guided the sampling process (Cohen et al., 2013). We decided to do a purposive or self-selective sampling where we asked for volunteers from among our colleagues who taught literature (Bryman, 2012). The teachers included both male and female, experience ranged from 5-20 years to get mixed opinions of all groups in the population. Even though the sample was small and we do not claim representativeness, it was ensured that in-depth, purposeful data be collected (Ritchie et al., 2013).

Ethical concerns were handled carefully so that no harm or discomfort may come to the participants (Bryman, 2012). The participants were informed about the project and asked for their consent through a consent form. The consent form contained details regarding the purpose of the project, how the data will be stored and used, voluntary participation, and anonymity. The participants were ensured that the data quoted in any published work will not be identifiable.

The interviews were conducted using Sindhi, Urdu, and English depending on the language chosen by the interviewees. Translation issues need to be considered in such cross-language research (Temple and Young, 2004). We translated the interview protocol to Sindhi and Urdu before the interviews in order to be able to take timely informed decisions (Santos et al., 2015). Moreover, to increase the reliability of the translations, we consulted each other and chose words that we all consented to ensure that meaning was not lost in translation (Fersch, 2013).

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis. The data was coded thematically. These codes were then reviewed and recoded analytically as suggested by Richards (2013). As Elliot (2018) suggests coding qualitative data is a messy process and needs to be reviewed

multiple times. Working in a team helped with the review of the codes and development of themes which are presented in the following section.

4. Findings

In response to the question of challenges of teaching literature in large classes, a majority of the participants talked about the challenge of having one-to-one experience with all students. Eight out of ten participants highlighted that with large classes, there comes the challenge of limited interaction between student and teacher. One of the participants remarked that for him, focusing on and responding to every individual student is very difficult. As a result, students feel neglected which creates a gap between students and teachers. One of the participants remarked:

“If I have a smaller class, let’s say 20 students, I would have fewer people to concentrate on and it would be easier to work on people and to pay more individual attention to them. The ones who are mediocre, often get ignored. I think when they are in a large class; we hardly have a chance to motivate them”.

Thus, responding to a large number of students is challenging. Another participant also shared her opinions that literature is all about interpretation and critical analysis of literary ideas. She said, *“If I am assigning a task to interpret some lines or do some critical analysis in a class of 80 students, I cannot listen to all 80 interpretations in one class”.* Hence, it reflects that large classes have the challenge of limited student-teacher interaction where teachers cannot give individual attention to a greater number of students.

The participants further elaborated that less student-teacher interaction in large classes often results in low student performance. Seven of the participants reflected that engaging students in large classes is very challenging for them. They highlighted that in large classes, students exhibit poor levels of engagement. The performance of those who require interaction and teachers’ attention for motivation is likely to suffer as the teacher cannot have one-to-one experience with all the students. In this case,

active students participate more and the passive ones remain silent and disengaged. One of the participants remarked that it is challenging for her to take backbenchers and silent students along and grasp their attention and when they go into discussion, a limited number of students participate. Hence, ensuring students' engagement, increased motivation, and active participation in large classes is challenging. One of the participants commented:

"I assign them home tasks and tell them if they want me to check they can bring it. Hardly, 10 of those 60-70 students bring them in. Even I do not have much time to ask everybody and make sure that everybody brings it in."

The participants looked at large classes as an obstacle in creating interactive dialogic sessions where all students can share their literary interpretations. Hence, large classes have a low level of students' motivation where the majority of the students remain passive and silent.

Five out of ten participants also talked about the challenge of class management while teaching literature in large classes. They looked at large classes as a problem in promoting student learning accommodating a greater number of students with limited resources. In the context of class management, three of the participants highlighted that in large classes, it is very challenging to manage the attention of students, to manage their retention throughout, making sure that the teacher is able to interact with everyone even those who are sitting at the back of the class. To be visible to all of them, to move into a position where students can see clearly, can listen properly, where they can read what is written on the board. Thus, managing all these things is really challenging in large classes. The participants also connected the issue of class management with limited resources as they do not have a proper sound system. As a result, the students sitting at the back of the large class always feel difficulty in listening to and getting instructions from the teacher. As one participant remarked:

"We are from a public university: we have a lot of problems. We do not have anything except a marker and board. We do not even have a mic. Maybe I am going to buy my own mic because students in large classes always have

audibility issues. Along with this, sometimes backbenchers complain that they cannot read what is written on the board."

Three of the participants talked about the challenge of class management in the context of class discipline. They reflected that sometimes, there are latecomers coming in, and then the teacher has to repeat and explain again what has been going on in the class. This disrupts the flow of the teaching process. They further elaborated that there are always some troublemakers or backbenchers who chat or use cell phones during the class. The teacher cannot monitor each student every second, so such students manage to get away with their mischief.

Next to the challenge of class management, four of the participants also discussed the challenge of making students clear about cross-cutting concepts in literature. They reflected that there are philosophical discussions and cross-cutting concepts in literature, for example, to negotiate stream of consciousness, to talk about existentialism, to discuss all those -isms that are being taught in literature, they cut across other disciplines and unless students have a basic understanding of those disciplines, it is challenging to furnish the learners with the knowledge to understand the concepts that are being negotiated. Hence, it is challenging for the teachers of literature to ensure that the message is clearly understood by the students because large classes have a variety of students, with different socio-cultural backgrounds and linguistic competencies. As one of the participants remarked, *"We know that literature does not offer any single interpretation, it is open to multiple meanings. In large classes, we cannot check what students have understood and how they are interpreting different theories."* Hence, it is difficult for teachers to check and evaluate whether students have any misunderstanding or misinterpretation because literature has got so many interpretations.

Four out of ten participants talked about the issue of time management that hinders employing interactive teaching strategies in large classes. The participants reflected that sometimes because of a greater number of students and time issues, they cannot employ interactive teaching strategies.

They get only three credit hours in a week. Like, if a teacher is doing the literature circle then students are asked to prepare for their roles a day before so that they can come to prepare the next day. Then they have to discuss it in the third class, so it has to be spread over three classes. Then there are other problems like when the assigned students do not show up. One of the participants remarked:

"I do prefer group discussion in my classes but it creates many problems. In a class of 50 minutes, if you ask students to arrange themselves into groups, they take 10 to 15 minutes to do it. Now, they are left with 30 minutes hardly to discuss. 30 minutes are not enough to discuss and share the findings with the class. In short, not every group gets the chance to share their points with the class."

Another participant shared that when the class is lecture-based, they do not have time issues. But if they are planning for other activities like presentations, role-playing, or group tasks, they cannot manage because of limited class time. It reflects that large classes limit the teacher to just one traditional teaching methodology where he/she speaks, and students listen. Lecturing still remains a predominant teaching approach in large classes of literature which hinders the teacher to inculcate new innovative teaching methodologies. Thus, it affects learning because of the time issues and greater number of students.

Three of the participants also talked about the challenge of a high degree of students' anonymity in large classes. They reflected that it is difficult to remember the names of students in a large class. One of the participants remarked:

"I think, not calling students with their names has a negative effect on my relationship with students. If I want to call a student and I do not even know their name, how will I address them? Sometimes, calling students names affects their attention and focus."

One participant also shared that she has memorized some names, but this also creates a rift among students. The students she knows by name feel somewhat privileged while the others feel left out. Hence, teaching literature in a large class has many challenges which contribute to less effective

teaching and learning. Teachers face the daunting challenge of teaching in large classes while maintaining the quality of instruction and subsequent value delivered to students.

The participants were also asked about the teaching tactics they employ to cope up with the challenges they discussed. In response to this question, the participants highlighted a variety of teaching tactics to overcome the discussed challenges of teaching literature in large classes. In response to coping up with the challenge of having one-to-one experience with students, the majority of the teachers having less work experience shared that they interact with students outside of the class via social networks and during their office hours. Five out of ten participants (GK, TS, MJ, SQ, FC) shared that they have Facebook groups of classes where they put questions and ask students to use the comment section to communicate. One of the participants remarked that since class time is not enough to respond and focus on every student, he encourages students to share their queries outside of the class, through email or Google classroom. One participant commented:

"I deal with this problem outside the class mostly. To keep the students interested, I keep changing my methodology. I try to build some kind of connection with my students through social media, they can Email me if they are confused about anything. I also encourage them to come to the office if they need to talk about anything. This helps me to keep connected to them." (SQ)

In response to the question of overcoming the challenge of engaging students in large classes, a majority of the participants shared that they experiment with a variety of teaching methods and incorporate different interactive activities in their literature classes. Seven of the participants talked about group discussion methods where they divide the class into small groups and assign students to discuss the main points or to analyze selected textual lines. This way, students interact with peers in groups. Four of the participants shared that they assign credited presentations and assignments to students. This way, to get marks, students do read and

prepare themselves for the task. Three of the participants mentioned the strategies of role-playing, literature circles, and pair work. Two of the participants discussed that they engage students in dialogic sessions and collaborative activities where they assign students to write reflections and discuss with their peers. One of the participants remarked that she engages her students to interpret some poetic lines. Sometimes she organizes poetry writing competitions where students get a chance to express their thoughts through poetry that always gets them excited. One participant remarked that he keeps experimenting with different methods. Sometimes he reads out a particular statement of a text and invites students' views. This way it becomes a little participatory and students get a feeling that they matter, their opinions matter, and the way they approach a text matters. Sometimes he randomly picks up the learners, keeping passive learners in mind because that is where teachers can encourage those who otherwise are exceptionally talented but they remain passive due to their own personal reasons or due to lack of encouragement from the teacher. One of the participants commented:

"I say, "okay, everybody come and stand around me." So, I make sure I am standing in the front, as a nucleus of the class. I ask students to read the text. Then I say okay, one student is reading another should interpret what is being read. I don't say much in that particular class. I make sure that students have greater talking time. So they all keep standing, forming all those circular rows around me. This way I kill their passivity."

Hence, to engage learners and make large classes more interactive, the participants incorporate student-centered teaching methods including brainstorming, writing tasks, literature circles, role-playing, presentations, credited assignments, and other collaborative discussion sessions.

Besides these teaching strategies, the participants also shared some other tactics to increase students' motivation and to create their interest. Two of the participants (GK, AS) discussed that they call students by their names. This gives them a sense of responsibility that they are important for teachers. One of the participants shared that he usually goes for some motivational discussion that gives students realize that they need to be more engaged and interested in the studies and classwork.

Four of the participants (GK, TS, SQ, MJ) highlighted that to engage students, they often post some subject-related videos, interviews of authors, and even some online assessment sites where students can check their progress and it helps them stay on track. This way they can be in charge of their own learning. Sometimes, they keep the mood lighter by joking and smiling. One of the participants remarked:

"I keep putting questions. I also do a bit of moral policing and a little bit moralizing that this is how you should do, please go read and I think all do not become able to follow but some of them do. This does bring about some partial difference if not total difference, but some partial difference is always there."

In response to the challenge of students' understanding of the concepts, two of the participants talked about code-switching and translation methods (FP, AS). The participants highlighted that in large classes, multi-ability and students' linguistic competencies create gaps in understanding. For this, they sometimes switch to Sindhi or Urdu to make students aware of what they are talking about. They make connections of literary characters with something related to practical life or link the ideas from the movies students watch. As one participant commented, *"While teaching Hamlet, I ask them about the film Sholay, the dramatic structure in Hamlet is like 'Sholay'. I try to create familiarity by connecting with Gabbar Singh to make them understand what the writer is saying."*

In response to the challenge of class management, the participants discussed the strategy of following strict class rules. Four of the participants highlighted that they formulate strict class rules on the very first day of the class in order to maintain discipline. For latecomers, they have the rule not to allow anyone who comes after 10 minutes. They apply the policy of carrot and stick to deal with unruly students in the class. One participant remarked that she has designed some strategies for maintaining class discipline. If a student is disturbing the class or showing a non-serious attitude, he/she is asked to leave the class.

In response to the challenge of audibility and visibility issues in large classes, four of the participants (FC, GK, TS, SQ) discussed the tactics of change of pace, place, and mode. They move around the class to see if all are on the same page, to check that nobody is checking messages on their WhatsApp or Facebook, and rearrange their seating arrangement. One of the participants remarked:

"I move a lot. I do not just stand at one place. Even sometimes I sit among students. I ask them questions while roaming. I also do this so that if they are not getting anything then I say to take mobile phones, take the dictionary, and Google the definition. Then they all search. I randomly ask them what definition they have found."

Hence, the strategies and tactics employed by the participants suggest that literature teaching in large classes can be made interactive and engaging by inculcating constructive teaching approaches to have significant improvement in learning outcomes.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study show that the participants faced a number of challenges related to student-teacher interaction time, student performance, classroom management, lack of resources, clarifying complex literary concepts, time management in interactive activities, and anonymity of students while teaching in large classes. Some of these challenges have been identified in large class literature widely. For example, these Pakistani university teachers' struggle with student engagement and anonymity resonates with what has been found by researchers across the globe. Various studies (e.g. Shamim and Kuchah, 2016; Hornsby and Osman, 2014; Exeter et al., 2010) have shown that maintaining student engagement in large classes is not possible for many teachers, and this results in students feeling anonymous and being passive as teachers cannot provide individualized attention. Even though it is an accepted challenge of large class teaching, academics have suggested that student engagement is key to making the most of large classes (Lawrence, 2019; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). This is reflected in the views of some of the teachers who believe that group activities and other forms of interaction help students engage in the classroom.

A variety of methods have been suggested in the literature to cope with these challenges, Wilsman (2018) suggests designing interactive activities to teach literature in the classroom. Some of the teachers in this study pointed out that using videos and other modes of media has proved useful to engage students. It was also noticed that the use of technology, e-resources, and social media to interact with students was more preferred by the teachers having less experience. These young teachers felt more comfortable while using technology as opposed to the more experienced teachers who were probably not as familiar and comfortable with these different modes. Teaching methods' preference seemed to be somewhat affected by the years of experience that the participating teachers had. Lecture method, group discussion, and presentation strategies were used by almost all the participants but more experienced teachers appeared to prefer the lecture method and group discussion more than the other teachers. Other more engaging and innovative methods such as role-playing, literature circles, feedback assessment, and writing tasks were used more commonly by younger, less experienced teachers.

An interesting finding of the study was that code-switching and translation method was used by senior teachers (FP and AS) to make students understand the concepts. This is not something that came up in literature relevant to large classes however code-switching is seen as an effective tool in teaching and learning in general (e.g. Pollard, 2002; Bhatti et al., 2018, Nurhamidah et al., 2018). Using code-switching as a means of engagement in a large literature classroom was perceived as helpful by these experienced teachers in a second language classroom.

Lack of resources was a common challenge that almost all participants discussed. They displayed a sort of acceptance for the lack of resources as shown in comments in the findings. Challenges related to resources are limited to the studies in less developed countries (e.g. Nakabugo et al., 2008; Onwu et al., 2005). Teachers in these settings have grown accustomed to problem-solving in such situations as using WhatsApp and Facebook in case of no virtual learning platform, moving around in class in absence of a mic.

Thus, teachers have learned to strategize with the lack of resources so that it hinders the learning process to the minimum.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, teaching literature in large classes has many challenges especially in public-sector universities in a developing country like Pakistan. Participants in the study talked about lack of resources, lack of engagement, and student anonymity as main problems related to teaching and learning literature in a large class setting. The experiences of novice and experienced teachers differ from each other in the way that they deal with these issues. Younger teachers adopt more engaging activities and use social media and technology to help student engagement.

It is recommended that teachers should be given training on how to use small-class activities in large classes. Teacher training will influence the pedagogical approaches used by teachers. Having peer observations and staff meetings to learn from each others' practices can also help improve teaching quality. It is further recommended that other studies in various universities in Pakistan and beyond be carried out to determine if similar conditions exist throughout the institutions.

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