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ABSTRACT

Relevant research literature does not generally support the notion that class size is a significant variable in learner achievement. This, if true, may be the result of various factors. Although teachers believe that they alter their teaching strategies for different class sizes, this may not be the case. More likely is the possibility that classroom lessons themselves are not significant determinants of the achievement of learners. Some research has indicated that students perceive classroom lessons to be inadequate or even a hindrance to the learning process, and tend to compensate for this by pursing extra-classroom learning or educational activities. While additional research on the effect of class size is needed to confirm this hypothesis, especially for language education, these observations point to the need for research on language learners study habits to see if relatively successful learners spend more time learning out of class than do less successful learners. (JL)

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LANCASTER - LEEDS

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES

RESEARCH PROJECT

HOW IMPORTANT ARE LESSONS, ANYWAY?

DICK ALLWRIGHT

PROJECT REPORT NO. 12

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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1 The Puzzle Of Class Size As A Variable In Learner Achievement [1]

The purpose of this brief paper is to set out my own reflections upon, and to encourage further reflections upon, a puzzle thrown up by our research so far into language learning in large classes. I want to see if it 'rings true', and to see if it appears to be a promising area for a future research focus. The puzzle essentially is that class size apparently does not affect achievement like it 'should'[2]. That is to say, the weight of evidence we find when we look at the relevant general educational research literature does not in fact lend anything like unqualified support to the claim that class size is a significant variable in learner achievement. This is in spite of the fact that teachers in general appear to believe that it is indeed a significant variable, and that they cannot reasonably be expected to get the same results with a 'large' class as they might with a 'small' one. The evidence is of course controversial, and it must be admitted that it has been obtained mostly in situations where class sizes do not cover a very wide range. It is also true to say that we do not have a body of evidence for the potentially special case of language teaching. Teachers undertaking a campaign to reduce class sizes, nevertheless, are likely to find their case undermined, rather than boosted, by the available research evidence, however inadequate it may be at present. They have also to face the possibility that perhaps

class size, after all, is not the powerful factor they have come to believe it to be.

2 But Why Might Class Size Be An Insignificant Variable?

One possibility, though it is probably not a very attractive one for teachers, is that in practice variations in class size change nothing else of significance. Perhaps in practice what happens in 'large' classes is not in fact any different from what happens in 'small', or 'ordinary', ones. Perhaps, no matter what they say, teachers do not really have different behaviour patterns, and do not actually alter their teaching activities, depending on the number of learners they have assembled before them in the classroom. This is clearly not how teachers see it, according to our research findings so far, since respondents to our questionnaires universally claim that they would like to use teaching strategies that at present they cannot employ because their classes are 'too large'.

If we do in fact accept that teachers at least try to make different things happen in classes of different sizes, then we are reduced to the possibility that what happens may perhaps be different indeed, but not, somehow, significantly so. Again, however, teachers clearly do not see it that way, to judge from the content of their complaints about what they cannot do because their classes are 'large'. They seem convinced that large

classes prevent them from doing things that would indeed be significant to learner achievement.

There is another possibility, but it is probably even less attractive to teachers : perhaps classes themselves, classroom lessons, are just not particularly significant events in the learning lives of learners. Perhaps the successful learners anywhere, in any subject, are those who know the limited role of classroom lessons, who know just how little they can expect of real value from classroom lessons, and who also know how to compensate for this fact in the rest of their lives. From research so far we do know a little about learners' views on the value of lessons, and what we know tends to reinforce rather than dispel such thoughts. If we take the data obtained by Safya Cherchalli (1988) in her doctoral work with Algerian senior secondary school learners as an example, then we can, in just a small sample, see a variety of viewpoints that might help us to understand better the possibility that learners might not see lessons as especially helpful to them in their attempts at language learning. First of all there is the issue of time on task. One learner made the following comment(3) :

> In theory we have three hours of English per week. In practice it works differently. By the time we settle down, a quarter of an hour for the registration call and so on.. well.. little time is left for us to learn English.. I don't know whether you can call a quarter of an hour an English lesson.

If many learners have such an experience, and as the norm rather than the exception, then it is surely easily understandable if they should consider lessons as rather unimportant events in their learning lives.

For some learners, of course, even lessons that last a significant length of time pose problems, if they have difficulty keeping up with what the class (or rather the teacher) is doing.

> Sometimes we're blocked by a word. While we're thinking about it the teacher goes on talking about other things and we can't follow any more so we switch off.

Again, if this is a common experience, then the perceived value of classroom lessons must surely be seriously undermined for such learners.

Other learners see lessons that they can keep up with as more significant for marks than for learning, a particularly interesting but ultimately depressing insight.

> I would like the marks to be given less importance so that we can concentrate on learning.

> In class, for the marks, I prefer what is easy, but to learn I'd rather have those complex exercises.

So some learners, at least, see right through classroom lessons and understand that they are not even directed at 'learning', but only at some clearly inferior set of criteria for achievement. In such circumstances how can we expect learners to take lessons seriously as their main learning resource?

Still other learners clearly have established alternative strategies to ensure that they do in the end learn something. Our first quotation under this heading leaves us not quite knowing how such learners do manage, though.

> When teachers give us exercises they expect us to remember what was done in the previous lesson, which grammmar rule we wrote, etc...But we don't operate like this.

One possible strategy is to rely on some natural ability, as does the following learner, apparently, and successfully so, too, from other evidence.

> As soon as we finish I can hardly remember. I don't learn the grammar rules, but the thing is I have intuition.

This problem of being able to remember lessons, even immediately after they have come to an end, has been noted elsewhere, and it again calls into question the ultimate pedagogic value of lessons. Of course if learners are not paying attention very much in class (as suggested by Cohen's controversial but intriguing work - see Cohen and Hosenfeld 1981), then we can hardly expect them to remember very much of what happens. One of Cherchalli's subjects had a very pertinent comment to make on this point, and had no doubts about what he could do to compensate for the uselessness, as he perceived it, of lessons.

> To be honest, sometimes I don't pay attention to the lessons because they are not so good for learning. But I always manage by using other books I have. I find them more efficient.

Our last quotation from Cherchalli's subjects shows us a learner who has developed an alternative strategy that builds on classroom lessons, but is clearly based on a perception of their necessary inadequacy. Again we are here dealing with a relatively successful learner.

> Today I've been very disappointed bacause after having had the illusion of having understood my lesson I've come to realize, through a set exercise on 'for' and 'since', that, after all, it is not enough to concentrate on one lesson to believe you're capable of doing an exercise. One has to do something extra : for example, to revise the lesson and to give deep thought to any point of difficulty.

For such learners lessons may be a starting point, but it is clear to them that really significant progress in learning takes place outside the classroom, and as a result of their own individual and largely unaided efforts.

I do not wish to be interpreted as arguing that lessons are necessarily of no use at all to learners, then, but I do want to argue that it may be a common experience for learners to feel that lessons make a wholly inadequate contribution to their learning. In some sets of cultural circumstances, it may even appear that the essential role of language lessons is somehow not to foster linguistic progress but to contribute in some other way or ways to the value of a formal education(4).

Teachers may of course be very willing to agree that lessons should not be expected to do everything and to be everything for everybody, but it is at least arguable that modern (i.e. recent)

methods, and modern teaching materials, tend to conspire to give learners the immediately convenient (but ultimately unhelpful) illusion that all the necessary learning will indeeed take place inside the classroom, during the lesson. Lessons tend to be filled with activities within which linguistic points are carefully embedded, perhaps totally and deliberately hidden from view. Learners who miss a lesson then must surely find it very difficult to know what to do in order to catch up. Even learners who have been in class are likely to have no clear idea of what to do in their out-of-class time to consolidate their in-class learning, especially given the fact that modern materials tend not to constitute a usable reference grammar for learners who do want to do out-of-class revision or private study.

Such an analysis may of course be more applicable to relatively 'favourable' settings, probably with 'reasonable' class sizes (in the eyes of the participants, at least, as in fact was the case for the situation Cherchalli was working in). Ironically, then, we could be doing a disservice to such learners, in such relatively favourable circumstances, by implicitly suggesting to them that lessons ought to be enough, and that no compensatory effort is therefore called for. Conversely, presumably, the more obviously unfavourable the situation, the more obvious it must be to all concerned that compensatory action is called for, both inside and outside the classroom. Extreme class sizes could be the most obvious indication of desperately unfavourable circumstances, to which

the only adequate compensation must involve a focus on out-of-class (but not necessarily individual) study. This alone could perhaps account for any failure of class size research to establish the importance of class size to learner achievement, if compensatory effort increases proportionately to balance any increase in class size.

3 How Could We Find Out If This Is The Case?

We could certainly investigate language learners' study habits, to see if relatively successful learners spend more time learning out of class than less successful learners, and to see if what they do outside of class builds upon lessons, or relates to them in some other way.

Another possibility would be to ask learners to tell us more directly, by questionnaires, by diary studies, and by interviews, about their perception of the relative importance and overall role of lessons in their whole learning process, to see if their perceptions vary systematically with class size.

A further possibility, of a different kind, is that instead of undertaking new projects, and putting learners and teachers to the trouble of providing us with yet more data, we might find much of what we want by searching among the raw data of previous projects.

4 But First, Is This Line Of Enquiry Likely To Be Productive?

In principle we should surely start by trying to make sure of the original suggestion that educational research fails to support the claim that class size is a significant variable in learner achievement. Even if we do end up having to revise our current generally negative position, however, it appears likely that we will never reach decisive closure on this issue, given the apparently insuperable practical difficulties in the way of conducting convincing research studies in circumstances where classes are indeed very large. So we are likely to still need to try to account for a somewhat undramatic relationship between class size and learner achievement.

If that is indeed the case, then it will surely be reasonable t look at factors that might in practic compensate for the numerous and potentially very damaging problems class size apparently introduces, to judge from the responses to our questionnaires. Among those factors it would undoubtedly be premature to claim that out-of-class compensatory study will necessarily prove dominant, but it would also be reasonable, based on the relatively informal evidence so far obtained, to expect it to be significant, and well worth our further research effort.

Notes

1 This paper was first presented in the Panel Discussion 'Language Learning in Large Classes' which was held during the 1989 IATEFL Conference at the University of Warwick.

2 For an early review of factors held to affect learner achievement (including class size - page 75), see Stephens (1967), Chapter Seven: The Constancy of the School's Accomplishment. For a more recent and highly critical review, that finds in favour of 'small' classes, see Glass et al (1982).

3 All the subsequent quotations are as translated from the original first language by the researcher.

4 See Coleman's (1987) interpretation of tertiary education in terms of a contrast between 'spectacles' and 'festivals'.

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