

Teaching Writing to Tertiary EFL Large Classes: Challenges and Prospects

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: May 02, 2021

Accepted: June 15, 2021

Volume: 4

Issue: 6

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2021.4.6.5

KEYWORDS

Challenges, large classes, tertiary education, writing

ABSTRACT

The rapid population growth, the excessive demand for higher education, and the increasing interest in English are behind the appearance of large classes at the Moroccan Departments of English in higher education institutions. The current study sheds light on teachers' experiences and probes into the challenges they encounter in teaching writing to large groups. Additionally, it seeks to provide some insights into how teachers approach this thorny issue. To achieve this end, the researcher opted for semi-structured interviews as a qualitative tool to cast light on teachers' perceptions of this issue and disclose the strategies they deploy to make teaching and learning of the writing skill conducive to productive outcomes. The findings reveal that university teachers face various problems in over-sized cohorts, including feedback, assessment, and classroom management. In the light of the findings, some suggested strategies will be set so that teachers working in similar contexts can implement them successfully.

1. Introduction

Quality teaching requires engaging students in the teaching process, motivating them, assessing their knowledge regularly, and making them autonomous. These goals of quality teaching become challenging to achieve when the students are crammed in a classroom due to their large number. Large size groups seem problematic for teachers, mainly when they teach the writing skill, which requires student-teacher interaction, constant practice, and regular constructive feedback. The outcome, therefore, can be a teaching-learning experience characterized by an equivocal pedagogical value. Accordingly, crowded classes arise various obstacles and difficulties that militate against both teachers and learners.

Writing has always been deemed a demanding task for both teachers and students; while the former does their best to impart language knowledge and to incorporate different teaching strategies and techniques so that students manage to produce adequate pieces of writing, the latter try hard to follow their instructors' guidelines. However, most students fail to be equipped with the necessary writing competencies. Tertiary education teachers, in actual fact, frequently complain about their students' inability to write decent writing pieces that meet the requirements of standard writing because of the students' poor control of writing techniques, grammar, organization, etc. Students at the faculty of Arts and humanities, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, are no exception. They grapple with writing problems, which undermine the quality of their performance.

A good writing skill is highly required in tertiary education, for it is the cornerstone of academic success in higher education. That is why students at the Department of English study writing skills in four successive semesters. Throughout the four semesters, students are introduced to writing techniques, paragraph structure, writing process, organization of the essay, and writing genres, among other critical aspects of writing. By the end of the fourth semester, they are supposed to master the technical, organizational, and functional conventions of academic writing; however, when the students reach the last year of their degree, most of them manifest low writing standards. Subsequently, improving the students' writing skills should be a top priority in tertiary education to bridge the gap between students' needs and teachers' expectations.

Interestingly, prior research (Entwistle et al., 1992; Pajares, 1992; Borg, 2006) asserts that teachers' beliefs and views directly affect their classroom decision-making. There is a tight relationship between teaching methods, strategies, techniques, and other classroom practices adopted by teachers and their perceptions of language teaching and learning. Put differently, teachers' perceptions about the size of their classes will necessarily affect the quality of teaching writing.

1.1 Objectives

Against this background, two main objectives emerge: First, the present study seeks to investigate the challenges teachers face and are likely to inhibit students' engagement in large classes of more than 100 students. As a matter of fact, students' enrollment in the English Department has dramatically increased during the last three or four decades. Second, it pinpoints the teaching strategies set by teachers to alleviate these challenges and facilitate the teaching process. Third, the study outlines some recommendations meant to enliven the teaching-learning process and yields some functional strategies other EFL teachers in similar contexts can implement.

1.2 Research questions

Based on the objectives mentioned above, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1-What are the challenges that tertiary education teachers encounter in teaching writing to large cohorts?
- 2-What strategies do teachers apply to make the teaching of writing effective and constructive?

2. Review of the literature

There is no general unanimity about what constitutes a large class. Teachers and students alike have different perceptions about what frames a large class and a small class, depending on their teaching and learning experiences, educational contexts, and the level of the learners. In developed countries, a class of more than thirty students is deemed large (Hess 2001). Brown (2001), likewise, postulates that the best class size should not outreach twelve learners. However, in developing countries, a large class can reach up to 250 students. Morocco, as a developing country, has its share of the problem. It seems, therefore, that the concept of appropriate class size is relative (Anderson, 2015) and depends highly on the context of teaching and learning and the course taught.

Unlike large classes, the role of small classes in promoting academic achievement has been uncontested (Anderson, 2020). Previous research substantiated that small classes offer a learning environment that elevates students' autonomy and involvement. Students have ample opportunities to participate and share their ideas with their classmates; they have no time for disruptive behaviors. Teachers can also have sufficient time to cover the syllabus/ curriculum, provide in-depth learning, do remedial and reinforcement tasks, sustain productive feedback, promote learning opportunities, monitor students' work, and create a healthy teaching environment Miller-Whitehead (2003).

Many researchers (Locastro, 2001; Harmer, 2000; Pedder, 2006) believe that huge class size can affect the teaching-learning process in several ways. Firstly, teachers cannot cater to individualized attention to all learners. Hess (2001) argues that it is difficult for the teacher to account for the immediate needs of the students in the classroom. Harmer (2000) confirms the inability of the teacher to meet the needs and expectations of all the students and asserts that the teaching-learning process becomes daunting for both novel and experienced teachers. Therefore, not all the students have the chance to participate and interact with the teacher and other learners. Subsequently, this issue of one-way communication may affect shy, weak, and unmotivated students who are often left behind. In the same line of argumentation, Yu (2004), in his case study on college students, find out that teachers neglect the individualized needs of students, and the expected outcome of such a situation is a stressful learning context.

Secondly, productive feedback on student writing is believed to bridge the disparity between students' needs and teachers' expectations. However, previous research discerns problems related to the value of the feedback students receive from their teachers. Quality feedback should be timely, individualized, and regular (Ouahidi, 1917). These challenges can be magnified when the class is crowded with students. Docherty (2010) stresses, "clear expectations of what constitutes good writing; the communication of these expectations to students; and opportunities for students to write, receive feedback, and use this feedback to improve are all factors likely to contribute to better student writing. However, programs designed to incorporate these factors tend to be offered in courses with small enrollment" (p. 373). Another issue raised by large classes and that affects students' accomplishment is the failure of teachers to provide regular constructive feedback to all the students in the large setting context, (Yelkpiieri et al, 2012).

Hayes (1997) classifies the challenges that teachers encounter into five categories: 1) the physical constraint due to the inability of the teacher to move in the classroom 2) classroom management issues.3) Absence of individual attention: few students receive the teacher's attention, whereas others are neglected. 4) evaluation due to the difficulty of assessing and providing

feedback to all the students. (5) learning effectiveness. In the same way, Anderson (2015) categorized the complaints of teachers about large classes into three types of challenges 1) classroom management, 2) the inability of some students to access, understand, and/or practice the learning content, 3) provision of individual feedback to all the students.

With these challenges in mind, teachers may believe that the solution to achieve better academic proficiency is to decrease the number of learners. This recommendation seems impossible to achieve because of the increasing rates of enrollment at the English Department, hence the need for some alternative sustainable strategies that teachers can use to generate students' interest, boost their motivation, and enhance their learning intake. The aim is to create a viable stimulating environment for both teachers and students. Therefore, there should be a shift of focus from the class size to more effective and realistic strategies likely to elevate students' writing competence. Against this background, a substantial body of research advanced some methodologies that teachers can utilize. Interestingly, large classes require careful preparation and planning to make both ends meet.

To address the challenges of overcrowded writing classes, Hai-yan (2014) suggests the task-based approach, which can be defined as "the focus on the authentic use of language for meaningful communicative purposes beyond the language classroom. Thus, students learn by doing tasks" Hai-yan (2014, p. 64). The task-based approach can be a turning point in EFL settings where the students are learning through doing. Therefore, to successfully implement the task-based approach, teachers should pay attention to four aspects: "prudent needs analysis of students, careful selection of authentic teaching materials, attempts to engage students in meaningful communicative activities" (p. 64). Hai-yan (2014) conducted an experimental study on classes including between 50 and 70 first-year Chinese college students. After one month of using this experimental approach, the participants were asked to fill a questionnaire. Subsequently, the resultant findings show that the task-based approach is conducive to effective learning since it can cut down the teacher's workload and boost students' negotiation of meaning and involvement in the task, Hai-yan (2014).

To reduce the constraints of crowded classes, teachers may resort to teamwork which reduces disruptive behavior, saves time, and encourages low achievers to engage in learning with their classmates, primarily when the teachers carefully design interesting classroom tasks (Adrian, 2010; Anderson, 2015). Additionally, Sarwar (2001) highlights the benefits of project-based learning, which encourages learners to collaborate, revise each-others written scripts, assimilate contextualized vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns.

Heppner 2007 advances that assigning responsibility to students can enhance student-centered learning. To cater to the exhausting task of providing feedback to all the learners in overcrowded classes, teachers may train the students to examine the writing pieces of their classmates. Self and peer editing can be an optimum solution to this challenge, which may increase the students' autonomy and decrease teachers' workload.

Not all researchers enumerated the significant difficulties of teaching large classes. For example, Hess (2001) believes that crowded classes can provide rich human interaction. In the same vein, Felder (1997) asserts that some teachers enjoy large classes. It follows that large classes may be advantageous when the teacher is skillful and knows how to take advantage of the situation by monitoring student-teacher interaction to create a thriving learning environment. Therefore, future research in this field is needed to provide convincing answers to this hotly debated issue, especially that prior research has not addressed the association between large classes and the teaching of writing.

3. Methodology

Prior research has addressed the challenges that teachers encounter in teaching large classes; however, few investigations have taken into account the synergy between teaching the writing skill and the huge number of students in a classroom. The present study seeks to bring to the fore the crowded class hurdles that teachers come across when they teach composition to their students and ascertain their strategies to make the teaching-learning landscape constructive.

Ad hoc semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers belonging to the Department of English at Sultan My Slimane University, Beni Mellal. All the teachers taught or are teaching the writing skill to undergraduate students. The respondents consist of four males and four females, with teaching experience ranging between six and 24.

The semi-structured interviews involve a descriptive and exploratory analysis to generate a holistic approach to this contextualized issue. Based on the literature review and the objectives of the current research, we designed the questions of the interview to include few preset questions to guide the interviewees and, at the same time to delve into their attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and perspectives about the research topic. This method allows the researcher to adopt follow-up questions to probe better into the issue under investigation. The interview grants the researcher the opportunity to collect spontaneous responses, void of the bias of predetermined answers. The transcripts of the interviews, which lasted for about half an hour each,

were coded and analyzed to determine the main themes. The thematic qualitative form of analysis was maintained to systematically categorize, accommodate the data, and generate adequate analysis.

4. Results and Discussion.

4.1. Challenges

There was a general consensus among the respondents regarding the challenges that threaten the quality of teaching in general and students' improvement in writing in particular. Very subtle differences were outlined about the challenges encountered among the interviewed teachers.

4.1.1 Large class

The respondents concurred that overcrowded classrooms exceeding 100 students had become a normality in the tertiary educational system, undermining students' writing accomplishment. They also share pretty similar views about what constitutes an ideal classroom since they believe that "the class size should not exceed 40 students especially when the course to be taught is the 'writing skill,'" as Farida, one of the respondents, put it. Hassan, another respondent, compared large and small classes and said that "the learning outcomes in small size classes are better than large size classes in all subjects. Of course, there are difficulties in teaching large classes. However, as I said previously, we try to find ways to make learners benefit from what we teach them regardless of the size of the class". Mustapha came up with the solution of hiring more teachers to substantially reduce class size, as he stated that "the ministry of education should recruit more teachers to overcome the lack of human resources." In brief, the respondents highlight that large classes are at the origin of the difficulties that students face in writing, and it is the role of teachers to find sustainable strategies to cope with them.

4.1.2 Need Analysis/ individual attention/ mixed ability

Teachers at the English Departments are aware that the teacher should conduct a need analysis because what is suitable for one context and group and/or level is not necessarily applicable to others. However, a need analysis is challenging to achieve as Hassan mentioned, "It is difficult to individualize students' needs and categorize them according to their abilities into different achievement groups." However, Both Said and Mustapha showed that teachers could not account for the needs of the learners since "in the same classroom there are students with mixed ability. There are average students, advanced students, and low achievers." The same idea was reiterated by Khadija who mentioned that there are "starters, movers, and flyers; it is hard to teach the three levels at the same time;" this situation implies that the teachers "cannot give each student his due care and attention." Said goes as far as to explain the dilemma of the teacher by underlining that "dealing with low achievers will make advanced learners feel frustrated and dealing with advanced learners will make low achievers feel bored."

This challenge implies that "few students interact with the teacher and participate, especially those in the front row seats," as Meriem mentioned. She also added, "How can students in the back interact if they cannot hear clearly the instructions of the teacher and the teacher always has to repeat and speak up. Sometimes they cannot see the board or the slides when I use a PowerPoint presentation". In fact, she highlighted the inability of some learners to follow the ongoing session. Besides, overcrowding intensifies the problem of organizing the setting.

4.1.3 Assessment and Feedback

All the respondents highlighted the challenge of sustaining productive feedback to students writing in large classes. They acknowledged that they could not monitor the work of all the students as Said mentioned, "I correct and provide feedback only for those students who manage to finalize their tasks and ask for my feedback." Hassan corroborated the same idea when he said that "I provide written feedback to learners from time to time when they submit their writing assignments, or they write a paragraph, and they want me to correct it for them." In the same line, Saida came up with two rhetorical questions, to which the answer seems to be "no." First, "Can we really correct every copy that they produce? Second, can we provide constructive feedback to every student when the classroom includes more than 100 students in each group?" She drew attention to two critical elements in teaching: feedback and teacher-student rapport: "when teachers tutor more than 40 students in the same room, they can't interact with the students and can't give all the students feedback". It seems, therefore, that the respondents supply feedback only to motivated students who are interested in the teachers' tasks.

All the respondents deny providing continuous assessment or formative tests to the students, as one of my respondents claimed, "Assessment is a complex issue at the university level. It is basically summative; we wait till the end of the term to assign the exams for the studentsand the teacher assigns grades to them, so we don't have the chance to give students feedback", an opinion that Hassan shares also. Hamid has a different point of view "after correcting the final exams and, of course, there are recurring problems. Under the light of these recurring problems, I can devise exercises and assign them to the students I teach in the coming semester". Thus, Hamid designs remedial tasks not for the students who sit for the exam but for the students he teaches in the following semester.

4.1.4 Theory vs. Practice

Although the teachers do not administer formative tests, they are aware of the importance of practice. Saida talks about this issue as follows "Good Writing requires much practice all the time. Even if students fathom what writing involves, they find it hard to write". Hassan also believes that theory is not enough, "Writing like the teaching of other skills involves some practice in class, so it is not a theoretical course which involves only lecturing so part of the lesson involves practice [.....] I think that it would be unfair to give theoretical lessons to learners about paragraphs and the day of the exam they are required to write a paragraph." Aware of the necessity of practice, Meriem accounts for this issue by "providing students with a variety of exercises that I correct with the help of students on the board. Sometimes I correct them orally, and it's up to the students to edit their work". Mustapha relates the problem of practice with the scarcity of material and resources, "As teachers, we don't have enough aid and teaching material. The only sources we rely on are handouts, exercises, and lectures. However, writing is more than this; it has to do with practice. We need to see exactly how students excel in performing writing and the extent to which actually they can produce ideas."

4.1.5 Classroom management

Another challenge that most respondents cast light on is the disruptive behavior of some learners, as Farida opined that "students sitting at the back do not follow what is going on in the classroom, they just disturb their classmates." Khadija concurred, "the teacher has no control over their arrival and departure; they can get in and leave whenever they like, which means we have late arrivals and early departures." She further added that "there is also noise inside the classroom. Sometimes I manage to control it". Similarly, Mustapha argued that "it is tough to keep good discipline and manage the class." Teachers may end up spending more time chasing after an orderly atmosphere that can guarantee to learn.

Discipline problems waste much time to teachers; Hamid said, "instead of focusing on the content of the lesson, the teachers should play the role of the policeman to keep the students quiet." The disruptive behavior of some students can easily contribute to distractions among students and lead to more complex learning conditions for both students and teachers. More important, it is difficult "to ensure that all learners can hear you and read the works you have assigned to them," as Farida mentioned. This disruptive behavior is likely to preclude the teacher-students rapport.

4.2 Strategies

All the interviewed teachers believe that teaching writing to large classes is a demanding experience since they believe it to be the main impediment to successful learning outcomes. Accordingly, teaching a productive skill, like writing, requires viable strategies to mitigate the challenges of the significant growth in student numbers. In efforts to reduce the challenges, teachers have suggested some ambivalent strategies that they adopt and adapt to their large groups to overcome the challenges. The results obtained from the data revealed four main themes:

4.2.1 Group/pair Work

Group work is one of the strategies that five respondents use in the classroom. Learners are encouraged to work together to fulfill classroom tasks and assignments. For instance, Saida associates group work with practice "I try to create opportunities for the students to practice. I try to have students practice in groups: fewer papers to correct. Each group writes a thesis statement and presents it to others. Then other groups will discuss its validity" This way, students can collaborate and discuss their classmates' answers. Said also uses group work to be able to provide feedback as he suggested, "I divide the class to four groups or more and give an assignment to each group every fortnight. I find it convenient to give feedback to each group in two weeks." Offering feedback becomes possible with grouping as a strategy. However, Mustapha believes that grouping is not possible at the university level "flexible grouping is not feasible at the university because the shape and the organization of the classroom do not help in being flexible while grouping the students or while splitting the large group into tiny ones.". Farida also uses pair and group work to reduce the workload, "I resort to pair work and group work to minimize the number of copies I should correct and encourage students to collaborate."

4.2.2 Lesson Planning

Careful lesson planning is deemed necessary to successfully weave the objectives and outcomes regarding the content, resources, and assessment. According to Mustapha, "It is possible to make it work by carefully planning our instructions to meet the needs of all the students in that large group that is to say we cannot overcome the challenges once for all, but we should minimize these challenges to teach a big group effectively." Khadija outlined the value of planning the lesson in order "To customize my teaching so that everybody can benefit from the course." Meriem further contended that "lesson planning can optimize learning, especially if it considers students' levels. The tasks should also be carefully designed to address the different levels that we have in the classroom."

4.2.3 Project-Based approach

Said suggested another strategy that he believes to be successful, "I approach it from another perspective I try to follow the project-based approach." Said considered the project based approach successful in teaching writing, but its implementation can be limited due to the irregular attendance of students. "The main challenge that you face here is that you find some students who do not follow or who are absent in some projects, and this makes the difference between the students." The respondent also explained how he implemented his projects and highlighted the reluctance of some students to fulfill their projects which can affect their achievement. "Normally, a project, in this case, is done in two sessions, i.e., four hours so, in this case, we assign students some homework and they finish their projects at home, and of course we tell them that if you bring your projects, I can correct them. However, normally not all students do these assignments. very few students do their homework and bring their final project for me to correct."

4.2.4 Task-based approach

Another strategy that can raise achievement is the task-based approach that one of the respondents frequently uses, "Task-based approach is related to the sessions and different skills. These task-based handouts are meant to involve the students and to make them deal with writing as a concrete test of skills to be practiced". This approach centers around one primary task without any predetermined language, "which encourages students to participate and discuss the basic characteristics that teachers want to emphasize."

5. Discussion and recommendations

The current study yields different interrelated findings. As per the respondents, class size is not conducive to constructive learning and teaching due to an array of challenges that teachers should cope with.

In light of the findings, it seems that learners do not get enough individual attention because they have different levels and abilities. As a result, teachers cannot interact with all the students; only front seat students manage to participate in classroom activities. This finding stipulates why teachers esteem it difficult to cater for a need analysis for all the students. According to Amua-Sekyi (2010), "developing appropriate teaching and learning styles in large classes with diverse needs is challenging in itself" (p. 145) (cited in Yelkpieri et al., 2012). Additionally, the students' fragile learning capacity needs close attention, more direct instruction, individual instruction time, and minor distractions to amplify their learning potential. These goals, according to my respondents, are difficult to reach in a large setting context. Accordingly, equity is difficult to achieve among the learners due to the physical classroom arrangement that hinders the teachers' free movement in the classroom.

Large classes, as most interviewees asserted, can be at the origin of an anxious environment due to the discipline issues that some bored and indifferent students may create. This view is corroborated by Locastro (2001). Interestingly, the teachers cannot move in the classroom easily to check that all the students are performing the assigned tasks as "some students sit between the rows" as one of the respondents mentioned in the interview, which implies the inability of the teacher to cater for the diversity of needs. The disparity of the students' abilities and their reluctance to interact with their teachers and classmates stand for their lack of motivation and involvement.

Feedback was seen as the cornerstone to providing individual attention, optimizing active learning, and amplifying students' participation. In this regard, the respondents opined that they could not regularly supply productive feedback to each student. This factor implies, first, they cannot assess the quality of their teaching. Second, with the neglect of feedback, students cannot pinpoint the problematic aspects of their writing to correct them and, therefore, cannot be aware of making any improvement. This lack of individualized feedback affects the active engagement of students and widens the gap between advanced and low achievers. The only individualized feedback that students get is in the form of a grade at the end of the semester. Therefore, the students cannot embark on a new semester with a grade as the only feedback that reflects their performance. The grade cannot be considered productive and constructive feedback that allows the students to produce better writing scripts. On the contrary, it is usually perceived by students as frustrating (Ouahidi, 2020).

To reap an optimum performance, some teachers suggested incorporating group work and pair work to dwindle the grading load and to encourage teamwork so that shy and below-average learners can actively interact with their teachers and classmates. Ostensibly, the integration of this strategy frees up the teachers and allows them to provide feedback to each group. With this aim in mind, the classroom activities should be well designed to motivate students, hence the need for careful lesson planning. To generate effective solutions, teachers must devise careful lesson plans to make the lessons energetic and stimulating at the same time. In addition, each session must be enticing so as not to leave students distracted and disinterested. Another strategy that some teachers highlighted is peer and oral feedback that can be accommodated to hone students writing and involve them in the teaching-learning process. Once the students are actively involved, the disruptive behavior, which wastes time and affects the flow of the lesson, and the attention of students will be reduced.

To lessen the problem of crowded classes in teaching the writing skill, some teachers suggested project-based learning to emphasize learners' autonomy and promote the involvement of all the learners, whether they are low or high achievers. However, Pham (2018) contends that although project-based learning asserts a high level of language performance, "teachers experience difficulty in improving students' motivation, difficulty in making the students concentrate on learning tasks, difficulty in helping students to connect new content with their prior knowledge, and difficulty in performing cooperative learning activities efficiently" p.333. That is why Grant (2002) emphasized the need to show students how to interact in a team and manage conflict that may arise within the group.

6. Conclusion and limitations

Teaching large classes is a demanding endeavor for both teachers and students. While the former considers it challenging to attend to the needs of every individual in the classroom, sustain constructive feedback, manage the classroom and monitor the learners' work, the latter cannot interact with the teacher and the classmates. Aware of this stressful and frustrating situation, the teachers suggested some interactive strategies to actively engage the learners and motivate them. They highlighted the significance of introducing group work and project and task-based teaching. Peer feedback and collective oral feedback are also viable in the context of large classes.

The present study is mainly qualitative in nature, and its findings are related to the teaching of writing skill at the English Department, Sultan My Slimane University. Therefore, its findings cannot be generalized to other contexts and other courses. Furthermore, the results could have been different had the researcher taken the perceptions of students into consideration or conducted quantitative research. Our results are promising and should be validated by a larger sample size. It is recommended, thus, that future studies on this vital topic should be undertaken to come up with conclusive strategies that allow teachers to overcome the challenges teaching large cohorts create and enhance the quality of teaching in tertiary education.

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