Designing and Teaching a Course for Large University English Classes

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Abstract

In Spring 2006, APU instituted Level 2 courses for Fundamental and Intermediate Japanese-basis English students, intended to prepare them for TOEFL and for English language lectures. These classes were to be upwards of 60 students per teacher, and be lecture and CALL based. The teaching of EFL students in such large classes required consideration of what was needed to make the best of the opportunities afforded by these lessons. A study in China by Zhichang Xu (2001) of the Hong Kong Institute of English gave a framework for these considerations, and this report aims to explain how our development team overcame those same concerns, and what we are continuing to do in order to improve these programs.

Key terms: large class, teaching strategies, peer to peer learning, classroom organization

1. Introduction

Teaching a class of 70 students is a great opportunity for both teachers and students alike, although this is not a statement I would have found myself agreeing with 18 short months ago. Classes containing a large number of students can be subjects of some dissatisfaction and suspicion for both teachers and students, however there are as many opinions about how to motivate students and organize classes as there teachers in the world; the fact is that teachers often have to place more of the motivational burden upon the students' own shoulders, or put in place strategies to optimize this motivation. Where an outcome is focused on the taking of full-scale lectures this intrinsic motivation is an important factor.

This report is not intended to advocate a move away from small class EFL teaching, but to present the opportunities that larger classes can give to students, the progress being made within these courses, and the plans for future development. It discusses the findings of previous studies, and relates them to the strategies put in place in the large class EFL course being taught at APU. These courses debuted in the Spring 2006 semester, and were produced by Lecturers Joel Carda, Matthias Nyitrai, Stewart Viita and myself, and taught by the designers and associate project members Todd Beuckens and Simon Bahau.

2. APU Course Introduction

2.1 Course overview

The course was for a mixed ability class of up to 180 undergraduate students in a lecture room, studying English as part of either a course of Asia-Pacific Studies (APS) or Management (APM). The lecture classes are two of the four classes taken by the students of this course in a week, and are 95 minutes in total length, including a 5 minute break coming around the 50 minute mark of the lecture. The video material for these courses was sourced from documentaries and on-line presentations, and also interviews in English with students around campus. Each week covered a different theme, the intention being to widen the students' knowledge base of a wide number of subjects, which is essential for approaching the reading sections of the TOEIC and TOEFL

tests. The video material also covers a variety of dialects within the English language, an exposure that is of vital importance for students at a university like APU, where the English used by our students is not always of the clarity and quality of the TOEIC or TOEFL listening exercises.

Although still relatively high compared with other courses, the size of the classes has been reduced as the course has developed, from a maximum of 180 students and 3 teachers in the Spring 2006, to 120 students and 2 teachers in Fall 2006, to around 60 students to one teacher in Spring 2007. While these are not high in comparison with true lecture classes, the components of focused discussion and feedback (student to teacher, teacher to student, student to student) make the numbers comparatively high. This was done after reassessment of the logistics of the classes, and the deeper familiarization the teachers had with the course itself: as the teachers became more experienced in handling the larger classes, and the materials used in class became settled, it was decided that one teacher per class was preferable. It brought the classes more in line with the expectations of the students, and more akin to their other classes. This is a point that may well be up for re-evaluation as non-course designer lecturers are assigned to this program.

2.2 Course Objectives

The ultimate aim of the course itself is to have the students become more comfortable about the taking of TOEFL, upon which originally hinged 40% of their final assessed grade (this was subsequently reduced to 30%). The concern at each stage was how the tasks were designed would help the students build their test taking skills. Students take several TOEFL and TOEIC tests throughout the term in order to gain the highest possible score. Improving the inter-personal communication of the students and spoken confidence was also a concern for the classes, as was the long-term aim of preparing students to work with true English-delivered lectures.

As the majority of students are 1st year this class may be the first time that these students are exposed to native speaker speed lectures and naturally occurring, often scientific or context-specific, technical vocabulary. As such it is a good chance for them to improve their ability to deal with ambiguity, and some 'panic-training': being asked to produce something original in a short space of time can be very daunting for any student, 1st year students arguably more so. By making the students understand the demands of TOEFL itself, and the needs that they have to fulfill in order to get the required score on the test, then they can begin to plan their study over a longer time period throughout the semester.

2.3 Teaching Assistants

To help with class organization and administration, TAs were also used on this course. While the use of TAs does not lower the teacher-student ratio, it does significantly lower the administrator-student ratio. The TAs on this course are students of the university, on both undergraduate and graduate courses, who were interviewed by the course coordinators and assessed as to their English proficiency along with professionalism and the assistance we felt they could give the course. There are TAs from more than 15 different countries, and this diversity meant that we had students with experience of English as a first language, second language and also as a foreign language. We were even fortunate enough to have several former students of this course return as TAs in the 2007 Spring semester, and their understanding of the dynamics of the lessons was very helpful in orienting them to their tasks in the lessons.

3. Previous studies

In other works concerned with the organization of large classes common themes of reference emerged. These themes were helpful in framing my consideration of the courses being taught here at APU. David Hayes in "Helping teachers to cope with large classes" (1997) highlighted Discomfort, Control, Individual Attention,

Evaluation and Learning Effectiveness as being key issues, with specific reference to the role of the teacher in such classes. Zhichang Xu, in "Problems and strategies of Teaching English in large classes in the People's Republic of China" (2001) referred to the concerns within the Hayes article, and expanded them to include a questionnaire of second year college students at Beijing University, looking at the attitudes of students within large classes.

The areas of concern in the Hayes article were effectively summarized by Xu: Discomfort was related to the "physical constraints" of teaching large classes, and the effect of the class being "very wearing" on the teacher; Control covered areas of discipline within the class; Individual Attention was the potential problem of neglecting some students; Evaluation was the "responsibility of checking each student's work; Learning Effectiveness was the worry that teachers were not able to fulfill what is perhaps their most important aim: to have their students learn (Xu, 2001).

The Xu questionnaire found that while "77.1% of respondents to the questionnaire stated that the differences of learning English in large classes and small classes are not significant", there were however four significant areas of student concern: students felt that they couldn't "draw enough attention from the teacher", therefore felt overly-relaxed, which led to problems of lack of class preparation, passivity and ill-discipline; students "rarely have chances to practice what they've been learning; students felt left out if they weren't the "early birds" in the first few rows"; "air pollution" and lack of fresh air was also a stated concern, especially when large groups sit together for up to two hours. These types of concerns were raised and considered during the implementation of the classes of Fundamental and Intermediate Level 2 at APU. A study of the students themselves has not been conducted due to the fact that the course content and teaching style have yet to be settled, meaning that an evaluation of all students in this course is not yet possible. Such a study is part of the development schedule of these courses.

4. Addressing the concerns of the Hayes study

4.1 Discomfort

There is very little that can be done to reduce the actual need for teachers to be active within a class where the intention is to encourage student interaction: teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) have to move to where the discussions are occurring. The amount of movement in the class is reduced by the original fact that three teachers and a minimum of four TAs (and some times as many as 10) were always present. This ratio changed to 2 teachers and 5-6 TAs with a class of 140 in Fall 2006, and is currently 1 teacher and 2-3 TAs with a class of up to 70. Placing microphones in front of students means that there is a need to move to the position of the speaker, but this task is often shared out within the class time itself, meaning that no one person has to move around the room by themselves.

4.2 Control

The eighty conversations of one hundred and sixty students can quickly reach a cumulatively high volume, and being heard over that can be a concern. Several measures were needed to try and gain control over the class volume. The first was the use of wireless microphones, which allows teachers at any point in the class to be heard instantly above the noise of the students. Helped by the TAs, these microphones have become a highly mobile way of also empowering students to be heard and to contribute to the class interactions. Students have reacted very well to the use of these microphones, and after a few weeks of practice they become more used to using them and hearing their own voice.

There was also a need for time control so that the students would know when the allotted time for certain

activities had elapsed, so the use of an embedded timer on the desktop, which could be set for differing periods of time, was used to give a tone when the time limits had expired. Students became used to the "ping" of the timer, and while it did not always end conversations immediately, students were aware that a teacher with a microphone would soon be calling them to order. While this technique was not continued as the classes reduced in size, teachers use their own ways of calling a class to order: tapping on the microphone, a verbal cue such as "okay", or some other common sign that discussion time was over have been used. Consistency of such cues was an important factor in ensuring students understood what was expected of them.

Students were also made increasingly aware of their need for focus in the class, and two methods became popular during the teaching of the course. The first was the taking of participation points in class, whereby the students would give their name before they spoke to give an answer or an opinion based on class discussion. These points are tallied, and from time to time teachers don't ask for volunteers but request students who had not yet received many participation points in class. Knowing they can be called on at any time provides more focus to their discussion.

From Spring 2007, the second method used for control was a worksheet which was related to the theme and content of the class. These worksheets sometimes have a great deal of material to help scaffold the class, or they can have an open frame for less context-specific video material, such as on-campus interview videos. Students are encouraged through spot-checks to take good notes, and this improved the amount of volunteering in class over previous semesters and also gave more support for those students called on to answer. These worksheets are still in development, but they were supported by a majority of students in a mid-term vote on their use: 71% of students voted in favour of continuing their use.

4.3 Individual Attention

Having considered the possibility that students could use the large class environment to become anonymous, we set about moving those students who often sat at the back of the class to the front few rows, thereby shifting the groups of students forward and having the class much nearer the front where the dias and teachers are. This tactic was further expanded to organize the students so that they were seated where they could be monitored by the teachers and TAs, and students were not allowed to sit in the centre of a five seat row. Students were paired off and the centre seat was left vacant so that no-one could hide away there.

A rotation system was implemented from Fall 2006, whereby students sitting in aisle seats were expected, at the cue of a 25 second stab of music, to shift seats and thereby move students sitting at the back to the front, providing students with new partners to work with, and allowing the teacher and TAs to be closer to each student at some time during the class. Although it is not always the case, this music is selected to match the lecture, for example the Star Wars Theme for Space week. This rotation happens between 3 and 5 times a lesson.

4.4 Evaluation

There were several methods of overall student evaluation for this course. The most prominent of these was the TOEFL test administrated by the Educational Testing Service. This score comprised 40%, and later 30%, of the overall grade for the course, and the other component mid-term and end of term tests were TOEFL-skill based. The design of the lessons around listening, vocabulary and grammar practice and feedback included in discussion activities is deliberately set to focus on this final evaluation.

The 10% of the course that is allocated for participation is currently almost exclusively weighted towards the students' activities in the large classroom lessons. The volunteerism of the students is a measure of their participation in the class and therefore they were scored based on this. The discussion and short pair work is designed to encourage students to engage with the lesson subjects, and have an achievable objective in the class.

TA's were trained to select students for participation whom they felt had excelled in the pair or small group work, or to select from the class lists when a student had not participated to the same level of their class mates. As the semesters unfold, there are students who volunteer far more than others. However, by the time the final participations points are tallied the students have been given equal opportunities to speak in class, either by choice or by persuasion, and not one is allowed to let these opportunities pass them by. The maximizing of these opportunities is the responsibility of the student.

4.5 Learning effectiveness

Focusing on the largest possible number of students, and ensuring that there were equal opportunities to speak in the classes, meant that while the effectiveness of the class may not be easy to assess, the effectiveness of the tactics we used in the class can be. Learning with different speech partners, sometimes with partners of different nations mean that students emerge from the course with at least some training in intercommunicative negotiation of meaning. The peer-to-peer interaction with at least four different interlocutors every class is something that students can't expect to have in other lessons. There was also discussion among the course designers of the anonymity aspect of the larger classes. While this was covered in the 'individual attention' section above as a negative point, it can also be seen as a positive way to lower the affective filter of the students to speak and experiment in English without the pressure of having a teacher immediately overseeing their every utterance.

The evaluation of their progress is the area that it is proposed to be investigated next. As the students are receiving different forms of instruction on a daily basis, in smaller classes and with differing activities, the use of students' overall English grades would not be a good indicator of the effectiveness of our classes. In conjunction with the computer-based course using the same large classes, content-based evaluation may be possible in the future, but is as yet logistically impractical.

5. Addressing the concerns of the Xu study

Responses to the concerns expressed in the Xu survey were largely addressed in the preceding consideration of the Hayes article, but I will summarize them again here. The attention from the teacher is facilitated by having the teacher move to the students, and also moving between groups with each discussion topic. Students are given several opportunities during the lesson to discuss the class issues with their peers, and practice what they have been learning. Teachers are available during this time for questions about vocabulary, grammar or phrasing, as are the TAs. Rotation of the students prevents them from sitting in the same places every class, thereby removing the "early bird" issue, and also prevents students from choosing to sit at the back of the class to avoid contact with the teacher. Finally, on the issue of air-pollution, we are lucky enough at APU to have good ventilation and cooling systems. As with other lecture classes, we were able to request air conditioning earlier than other rooms if it was necessary, and as such air pollution issues have not been a problem so far on this course.

6. Evaluation and suggestions for improvement

This is a report based on the third semester of teaching; the four teachers engaged in this class design are constantly engaged in re-evaluation. This course is likely to evolve further from now, but the basic perimeters of the lesson structure are fairly set. The lessons have a regular pattern, and the implementation of strategies such as rotation and worksheets on a consistent basis have helped to facilitate class control. Clearly this is an area and a methodology that is growing in importance and research depth, and therefore my ability to present a complete and tested methodology for this type of class is not possible at this time. What I have attempted to do is set

out some of the real-life problems encountered on a day to day basis within the classes, and suggested ways of mitigating or removing them based on the personal experiences of the teachers of these courses.

As this course continues to grow and evolve, it will be necessary to reassess some of the points of these lessons. The first, and perhaps most important is integration with other levels. This will require that other lecturers from other English courses observe the classes to provide the lecturers developing the course with feedback on what they as fellow teachers saw that could be improved, but also how the courses could be better integrated in theme and content with the other English course that the student are taking at the same time. As a long-term goal is to enable students to work in full English lectures, this kind of feedback would be most helpful.

It is also important to try and alter perceptions of what large class courses are able to achieve. Hopefully with this overview of the course, we can begin to dispel the myth that teaching within a large class is inherently ineffective, or inferior to other classes. While I can concede that it has the potential to fail on both those counts, it is not for lack of planning or consideration. Any class can fail to connect with the core needs and motivations of the students if it does not address these issues in a consistent and intelligently planned way. In order that this continues to be a viable program it will require input from a range of sources and support from within the faculty. Any and all suggestions are welcome, as are requests to visit our classes to observe and give feedback.

Another key point for future development is increased integration with the CALL classes that make up the second half of the course which take place in IPS classrooms. This part of the course is based upon on-line learning and self-access materials for the students to address shortcomings in their TOEFL training, grammar deficiencies, listening practice, and in the future skills such as typing and production of their own on-line materials will be included. In order that both sections of the course are a success there needs to be a synergy of the two. This is an area that has been a key focus for the last two semesters and will continue into next semester and beyond.

7. Conclusion

These courses have been incredibly challenging to work on, but to witness the development of the strategies outlined above has been fascinating and easily the most rewarding project I have ever undertaken. While there still exists large potential for development and refinement, the steps we have taken from the initial implementation of the course to this point show what can be done. Large class teaching is not a replacement for small class courses; it is clearly not suitable for every learning outcome required by EFL. However, for the purposes of providing students the opportunity to access a wide range of material allied to peer-to-peer target language use, these large class courses have their advantages. Personally speaking, the development and teaching of this course has been a rewarding project, and one that has the potential to provide our students at APU with a unique learning experience, and a path to language-use opportunities they might not otherwise have had.

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Appendix

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