

Teaching Large Classes: What are the Beliefs of Yarmouk University Instructors?

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to investigate the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors regarding teaching EFL to large classes. The researchers distributed a questionnaire to 22 instructors at the Language Center. The questions mainly concerned the issues of teaching environment of large classes and instructors' performance in such classes. The results show that instructors' beliefs towards teaching large classes are medium in general and assert that teaching large classes is a problematic area. Moreover, they show that instructors' beliefs towards their performance are high despite the difficulties they encounter. In addition, they show that there are statistically significant differences in their beliefs towards the teaching environment due to gender in favor to females. Lastly, the results show that there are statistically significant differences in their beliefs towards their performance in the classroom due to educational level in favor to PhD holders. The researchers recommend conducting further research in class size context.

Keywords: EFL, Jordan, large class, teachers' beliefs, university education

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Introduction

English language has become the language of international and inter-cultural communication worldwide. In today's business world, the trends towards globalization increase the demands towards learning the language as a key to interactions between nations and a ticket to guarantee a shelter under the globalization umbrella needed by all nations (Al-Khatib 2000).

In fact, interest in teaching English language in Arab countries has been increasing. Most Arab countries introduce English as a compulsory study subject at schools. At tertiary level most universities use English as a medium of instruction in most faculties. According to Zughoul(2003), a major Jordanian linguist, English is "still badly needed in the Arab world for the purposes of communicating with the world, education, acquiring technology, and development at large" (p.2). Frankly speaking, more efforts need to be exerted to raise the quality and standard of English of the Arab learners at all levels.

Concerning the Jordanian context, the widespread of English language and the accelerated globalization have made English indispensable to almost every field in Jordan. English language is a mandatory study subject at schools from the first grade and in many cases from KG1. At Jordanian universities, English is the medium of instruction and learning in most academic disciplines.

In spite of the fact that students enrolled in Jordanian universities have studied English for at least 12 years, their low proficiency has raised many concerns among educators. Students have relatively low exposure to the language and low need to use English in their daily life exposure (Jdetawy, 2011). Besides, the students' background knowledge after completing the school stage and before joining the university may affect their proficiency level in English. Another factor is the level of difficulty of the courses taught to them at the university. Moreover, their proficiency may be affected by the competences of the instructors of English and the methodology they apply while teaching them.

Another reason that might be attributed to the students' low proficiency in English is large classes and Yarmouk University students' have their share in this problem. At the present time, increase in class size is currently a universal phenomenon and perceived by administrators to be the only solution to deal with the shortage of manpower and resources. Large size classes do not provide an ideal environment for teacher- student interaction. They are more difficult to manage in that the teachers find it difficult to provide individualized help to students, which projects more burden on teachers. Hayes (1997) summarizes the problems of teaching in large classes as follows:

Discomfort: The physical constraints imposed by large numbers in confined classrooms make many teachers worried. They feel helpless when they want to promote student interaction, since there is no room to move about. Some teachers also feel that teaching in large classes is physically very wearing.

Control: The discipline aspects of large classes make teachers worry most of the time.

Individual attention: Many teachers worry that they are neglecting the students' individual needs.

Evaluation: Teachers worry about not being able to check all of their students' work.

Learning effectiveness: All teachers want their students to learn English effectively. They are understandably worried if they don't know who is learning what.

In fact, teachers' beliefs of class size differ from one institution to another. Such beliefs are important in order to find solutions for various problems that may emerge in large classes. Oladejo (1992) indicates that many studies have to be conducted to investigate teachers' opinions about large classes to allow them to give their own ideas which may be considered as solutions to large class problems. This may help in increasing the quality of education at all levels, and may show the effectiveness of reducing the number of students inside the class room.

In order to fully understand the problem of large class size and its effects, teachers' own points of view concerning such issues should be taken into consideration since teachers are cornerstone of the educational process as a whole.

Teachers' Beliefs

Teachers, especially English teachers, prefer teaching in small classes because they believe that students of small classes learn better as teachers can employ plenty of activities and practice; however, their beliefs are not supported by much research in this respect (Bahanshal, 2013). Moreover, the literature review reveals that the amount of research about class size in developed countries far outweighs that in developing countries. Therefore, more studies are needed to investigate the issue of class size in developing countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Egypt and Jordan (Bahanshal, 2013).

In order to develop more effective teaching approaches, teachers' beliefs need to be understood well. Large classes are now a trend in tertiary education in Jordan where little is known about teachers' beliefs. It is worthwhile though, to listen to what the lecturers believe concerning large classes before making decisions to implement any policy of increasing class size.

Teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes have been often discussed in literature because they are important for understanding and developing the process of teaching and learning. Teachers' beliefs for sure affect their strategies to cope with the challenges they face in their profession as well as their impact on student' learning process, motivation and achievement.

Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning and how it could affect their teaching practices, activities, and outcomes are essential in finding effective teaching methods (Burns, 1992; Shavelson & Stern 1981). Thompson (1992) describes beliefs as the personal views, conceptions and or theories. Teachers are highly affected by their beliefs which play a vital role in their development and are closely related to their values and their views of the world (William & Burdon, 1997). They stated that "teachers' deep-rooted beliefs about how languages are learned will pervade their classroom actions more than a particular methodology they are told to adopt or course book they follow" (p. 57). According to Pajares (1992), belief systems represent a personal guide by helping individuals define and understand the world and themselves. He found that there is "a strong relationship between teachers' educational beliefs

and their planning, instructional decisions, and classroom practice". Moreover, Oppenheim (1981) stated that attitudes are reinforced by beliefs (the cognitive component) and often altered by strong feelings (the emotional component) that will lead to particular forms of behavior.

For the purpose of this paper 'Belief' is defined as– the acceptance of something as true, or thinking that something could be true (Schwitzgebel, 2011).

Questions of the study

1. What are the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards teaching large classes?
2. What are the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards their performance while teaching large classes?
3. Are there any statistically significant differences at $\alpha = 0,05$ in the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards their performance while teaching large classes and towards the teaching environment due to their gender?
4. Are there any statistically significant differences at $\alpha = 0,05$ in the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards their performance while teaching large classes and towards the teaching environment due to their educational level?

Problem of the Study

Large classes are a big problem that encounters instructors of English as a foreign language in developing countries. Jordan, as a developing country, is no exception and has its own share of large class problems. The Language Center at Yarmouk University was established in 1979 and is one of the largest centers at Yarmouk University. This center serves more than six thousand students from various disciplines each semester. The center is responsible for teaching two compulsory EFL courses for undergraduate level. The average EFL class size is currently around 75 students as opposed to 30 students back in 2001. This growth in class size has meant that the instructors at the Language Center are teaching classes larger than they taught five years prior, and this increase is spiraling upward in the near future. Moreover a new building with twelve lecture halls each designed to accommodate 196 students in addition to four auditoriums is now under construction at Yarmouk University and it will serve up to 4000 students per hour studying compulsory courses. This is what actually makes Yarmouk University an ideal institution to conduct the needed research to investigate and ascertain the beliefs of the instructors regarding large classes. Moreover, it is hoped that the results of this research, along with other research papers, can lead to a positive change. The researchers, as instructors at Yarmouk Language Center, hope that the results of this research would be able to persuade university administrators to decrease the number of students inside the class rooms, specifically classes of English compulsory courses.

Purpose of the study

This study aims at investigating the beliefs of Yarmouk university instructors about teaching large classes.

Importance of the study

This study may broaden the base of knowledge of the university authorities, policy makers, researchers and other stockholders of education, since it is hoped that the results may shed light on the problems of EFL large classes. Thus, the results may present solutions that

target gradual improvements to overcome the problems of large classes and to improve the quality of education at the university level. Secondly, it may encourage the university authorities to employ more lecturers to teach general courses regardless of the expenses that may affect the university budget. Furthermore, the results may suggest the need for training programs for teachers targeted at how to teach and manage large classes. Moreover, the university may equip the instructors with the teaching facilities that are strongly needed to teach both small and large classes. Lastly, the results of this study may also add to the existing literature which can be used as a reference for other researchers to investigate the problem in other Jordanian universities and to conduct further research.

Limitations of the study

The generalization of the results of this study is limited to Yarmouk University instructors teaching 101 at the Language Center.

Literature Review

A great deal of effort has been exerted to uncover teachers' beliefs in language teaching (Borg, 2006; Chen & Goh, 2011; Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, & Son, 2004) as teachers' beliefs have a great influence on their teaching practices (Borg, 2003; Chen & Goh, 2011). While extensive research was conducted on large class teaching, not much research has investigated teachers' beliefs concerning large classes.

The attitudes towards teaching large classes vary from one teacher to another. It is not surprising to find some teachers enjoy teaching large classes (Felder, 1997). They think that if adequate strategies are adopted, students can achieve more and the ability to teach this large number of students well, can give instructors a sense of job satisfaction and pride. .

According to (Hayes, 1997) most English teachers tend to view teaching English in large classes rather negatively. They often associate large English classes with disorderliness, lack of control, lack of students' attentiveness, lack of teacher-student interactions, and therefore, lack in the students' ability to speak the language fluently.

Shapson et al. (1980) investigate the effects of class size on teachers' expectations; the attitudes and opinions of students and teachers, student achievement in reading, mathematics, composition and art, student self-concept, and a variety of classroom process variables such as teacher-pupil interaction and method of instruction. Overall, the findings of the study indicate that small classes offer more flexibility to the teachers compared with the larger classes.

Besides, Bennett (1996) designed a study to assess the attitudes and perceptions and experiences of head teachers, parents, chairs of governors, and teachers related to the class size in schools. According to the teachers, based on data gathered through a questionnaire from 325 primary schools, it was found that class size affects the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers consider that smaller classes provide more attention for individual children while larger classes make assessment difficult.

Çakmak (2009) used a questionnaire including open-ended items to collect data regarding the perception of student- teachers about the effect of class size with regard to

effective teaching process. The study reveals that there is a direct relationship between class size and motivation, teaching method used, classroom management, and assessment according to student- teachers' views.

A very recent study was conducted by Nguyen and others in 2015. They researched the factors affecting the efficacy of teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Vietnamese higher education from twelve EFL teachers' perspectives at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH), Vietnam. The study explored both positive factors and negative factors. The large number of students was a common complaint raised by the majority of the teachers. At HUTECH, there were about 50 to 55 students in each English class, and this was believed to reduce the quality of English teaching and learning. Teachers of large classes found it difficult to control and manage the class well. It was also especially difficult and time-consuming for the teachers to employ communicative activities such as pair work and group work. In addition, the teachers said that it was impossible to bring the highest benefits and effectiveness to the students in such large classes.

After this brief review of literature on class size and teachers' beliefs, it is apparent that teachers of large classes believe that teaching such classes is considerably difficult.

Method and Procedures

This section presents the methodology that the researcher followed in this study. It includes the design of the study, the sample of the study, the instrument, the validity and reliability of the instrument, the appropriate statistical analysis and the procedure of the study.

Design of the study

The quantitative method was used in this study. To answer the questions of this study, the researchers used a questionnaire to collect numerical data.

Sample of the study

The sample of the study includes all the instructors teaching 101 at the Language Center at Yarmouk University which consists of 22 female and male EFL. The sample of the study is shown in Table 1:

Table 1 *Frequencies and percentages of the study sample*

| variables | level | Frequency | Percent |
|------------|-------------------|-----------|---------|
| Gender | Male | 11 | 50.0 |
| | Female | 11 | 50.0 |
| Education | Master's degree | 15 | 68.2 |
| | PHD | 7 | 31.8 |
| Experience | Less 5 years | 3 | 13.6 |
| | More than 5 years | 19 | 86.4 |
| | Total | 22 | 100.0 |

Instrument of the study

To achieve the objectives of the study the researchers implemented a questionnaire adopted from Jimakorn and Singhasiri (2006). It consisted of three sections: section I is a demographic section to get the respondents' background information on gender, teaching

experience, and education Section II concerns the respondents' knowledge of the university policy on class size. Section III, the core of the study, contains facts and opinions concerning:

- 1- The general condition of their lecture halls.
- 2- Teaching and learning conditions in large classes.
- 3- Degree of teaching difficulty in large classes.
- 4- Opinions towards teaching in large classes and small classes.

The scoring scale followed in the questionnaire has the following five scales:

- Strongly Agree =5
- Agree=4
- Uncertain=3
- Disagree=2
- Strongly Disagree=1

Validity of the questionnaire

To validate the instrument, the content of the questionnaire was assessed by a jury of 5 lecturers and researchers at Yarmouk University, and their comments were taken into consideration in order to improve some of the items in the questionnaire. Thus, a number of items were omitted especially the open ended questions. Also, the researchers divided the two sections of the questionnaire into two domains in response to the jury's suggestions.

- The first domain is about teaching environment.
- The second domain is about teachers; performance in the classroom.
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Reliability of the questionnaire

In spite of the fact that the researchers adopted Jimakorn's and Singhasiri's questionnaire, they computed the consistency co- efficient using Cronbach alpha as shown in Table 2

Table 2 Reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach alpha

| | Cronbach alpha |
|----------------------|----------------|
| Teaching environment | 0.73 |
| Performance | 0.93 |

Procedures of the Study

The following procedures were followed for the purpose of collecting data:

- Determining the purpose of the study
- Determining the sample of the study
- Adopting the instrument of the study which is a questionnaire from Jimakorn and Singhasiri (2006).
- Distributing the questionnaire to the sample of the study
- Getting the results and analyzing them in light of the questions of the study
- Drawing conclusions and recommendations according to the results of the study.

Results and Discussions

To answer the first question (what are the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards teaching large classes?), means and standard deviations of the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards teaching large classes were computed as presented in Tables (3)

Table 3 Means and standard deviations of the beliefs of Yarmouk university instructors towards teaching large classes ranked in a descending order

| Rank | N | Item | Mean | Std. Deviation | dg |
|------|---|---|------|----------------|--------|
| 1 | 8 | Assessment will focus on tests and examination rather than homework or continuous assessment e.g. tasks, assignments, group projects. | 3.91 | 1.477 | High |
| 2 | 2 | The university saves the budget as it does not need to pay for facilities like electricity bills or extra teachers. | 3.50 | 1.371 | High |
| 3 | 5 | Teaching in large class is suitable for teaching receptive skills – reading and listening | 3.36 | 1.866 | Medium |
| 4 | 1 | Teachers save time and energy when teaching in a large class as they do not need to repeat the same lessons many times. | 3.00 | 1.852 | Medium |
| 5 | 6 | Students still have chance to practice or work in groups if they have to learn in a large class | 2.95 | 1.463 | Medium |
| 6 | 7 | Teaching in large classes promotes lecture-based approach rather than interactive approach. | 2.95 | 1.704 | Medium |
| 7 | 4 | Teaching in large classes is suitable for teaching productive skills – speaking and writing. | 2.82 | 1.893 | Medium |
| 8 | 3 | The university does not need many teachers. | 2.68 | 1.427 | Medium |
| | | Total items | 3.15 | .680 | Medium |

Table 3 shows that item 8 "Assessment will focus on tests and examination rather than homework or continuous assessment e.g. tasks, assignments, group projects." has the highest mean (3.91). On the other hand, it shows that item 3 "The university does not need many teachers" has the lowest rank (mean =2.68).

In fact, the previous results showed that the beliefs of teachers towards teaching large classes were medium in general. This may be due to the fact that, large classes need extra effort from the instructors in terms of organizing the educational environment taking into consideration the individual differences among students. Such effort requires teaching facilities such as laboratories, computers, chairs and other instructional aids. This result partially agrees with most of the studies of the related literature except the study of Felder (1997) who stated that some teachers enjoy teaching in large classes because they think that if adequate strategies are adopted, students can achieve more and that large classes give instructors great satisfaction and self- pride that they can teach this large number of students

To answer the second question (What are the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards their performance while teaching large classes?) means and standard deviations of the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards their performance while teaching large classes were computed as shown in Tables 4.

Table 4 Means and standard deviations for items of the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards their performance while teaching large classes ranked in a descending order

| Rank | N | Item | Mean | Std. Deviation | dg |
|------|-----|---|------|----------------|--------|
| 1 | 11 | Having students work in groups in class | 4.64 | .492 | High |
| 2 | 20 | Developing productive skills, i.e. writing and speaking | 4.64 | .790 | High |
| 3 | 12 | Being able to give support and advice to individual students at the same time | 4.45 | 1.184 | High |
| 3 | 15 | Giving and checking homework or assignments | 4.45 | 1.184 | High |
| 5 | 16 | Marking exams | 4.45 | .800 | High |
| 6 | 9 | Being able to see the whole class. | 4.41 | .503 | High |
| 6 | 10. | Using the right level of voice | 4.41 | .796 | High |
| 6 | 13 | Giving equal share of class activities | 4.23 | 1.152 | High |
| 9 | 6 | Reviewing lessons | 4.18 | .395 | High |
| 10. | 19 | Developing productive skills, i.e. writing and reading | 4.09 | 1.540 | High |
| 11 | 8 | Determining methods of evaluating student outcome | 4.05 | .653 | High |
| 11 | 21 | Monitoring work and giving feedback | 4.05 | 1.090 | High |
| 11 | 23 | Using audio-visual aids | 4.05 | 1.527 | High |
| 14 | 4 | Selecting instructional techniques of teaching | 4.00 | .617 | High |
| 14 | 14 | Providing appropriate pace of lessons | 4.00 | .617 | High |
| 14 | 18 | Knowing the students individually | 4.00 | .926 | High |
| 17. | 17. | Creating a good relationship between the teacher and the students | 3.77 | 1.232 | High |
| 18 | 1 | Timing the lessons | 3.64 | .790 | High |
| 19 | 22 | Managing discipline | 3.59 | .796 | High |
| 20 | 5 | Previewing lessons | 3.55 | .858 | High |
| 20 | 7 | Preparing handouts and other materials | 3.55 | .858 | High |
| 22 | 3 | Determining models and strategies of teaching | 3.36 | .848 | Medium |
| 23 | 2 | Setting up goals of the lesson | 3.18 | .733 | Medium |
| | | Total (performers instructors) | 4.03 | .613 | High |

Table 4 shows that Item 11 "Having students work in groups in class" has the highest mean (4.64). This table also shows that item 2 "Setting up goals of the lesson" has the lowest rank (mean =3.18).

The previous results indicate that the level of Yarmouk University instructors' performance was high. This result reflects the fact that these instructors practice the appropriate methods of teaching because they are highly qualified, skillful and experienced. In addition, they have strong feelings of loyalty to their university since they try their best to enhance the quality of learning in general and students' levels in specific despite the various problems they face during the educational process such as the lack of facilities.

To find out whether there are any statistically significant differences at $\alpha = 0,05$ in the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards their performance while teaching large classes and towards the teaching environment due to their gender, t-test analysis was conducted and the results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 T-test results of instructors' responses on the questionnaire considering their gender

| | SEX | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---|--------|----|------|----------------|--------|----|-----------------|
| Large classes instructors' beliefs towards teaching environment | Male | 11 | 2.81 | .590 | -2.674 | 20 | .015 |
| | Female | 11 | 3.49 | .606 | | | |
| Instructors' beliefs towards their performance in the classroom | Male | 11 | 3.88 | .800 | -1.192 | 20 | .247 |
| | Female | 11 | 4.19 | .312 | | | |

Table 5 shows that there are statistically significant differences at ($\alpha= 0.05$) in large classes instructors' beliefs towards the teaching environment due to Gender variable in favor of female. This result indicates that teaching large classes is more problematic for females rather than males because large classes need extra effort in terms of class room discipline. In other words, male instructors may be being able to control male students better than female instructors. On the other hand, there were no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha= 0.05$) in the beliefs of Yarmouk university instructors towards their performance in the class room due to Gender variable. This result is logical in terms of being in harmony with the educational situation at the university since all male and female instructors perform their teaching practices in similar circumstances in terms of having nearly the same number of students in their classes in general and in terms of facilities available for them.

To find out whether there are statistically significant differences in the beliefs of Yarmouk University instructors towards their performance while teaching large classes and towards the teaching environment due to their educational levels, t-test analysis was conducted and the results are shown in Table 6

Table 6 t-test results of instructors' responses on the questionnaire related to their Educational level

| | Education | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--|-----------------|----|------|----------------|------|----|-----------------|
| Large classes instructors beliefs towards teaching | Master's degree | 15 | 3.24 | .812 | .946 | 20 | .355 |
| | PHD | 7 | 2.95 | .098 | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------|----|------|------|--------|----|------|
| environment | | | | | | | |
| Instructors' beliefs towards their performance in the classroom | Master's degree | 15 | 3.80 | .612 | -3.073 | 20 | .006 |
| | PHD | 7 | 4.53 | .143 | | | |

Table 6 shows that there are no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in large classes instructors' beliefs towards the teaching environment due to Educational level variable because both PhD holders and MA ones perform their educational practices in the same educational environment. On the other hand, there are statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in large classes instructors' beliefs due to Educational level variable in favor of PhD holders. This result is may be due to the fact that PhD holders have more cognitive knowledge which is reflected positively on their performance since they have higher degree than their MA colleagues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this research show that Yarmouk University instructors' beliefs towards teaching large classes are medium in general. However, the results show that the instructors' beliefs towards their performance are high despite the difficulties they face, such as the lack of facilities. Moreover, results show that there are statically significant differences in large classes instructors' beliefs towards the teaching environment due to gender variable in favor of female. Finally, while the results of this research paper find no statically significant differences in large classes instructors' beliefs towards the teaching environment due to education level variable, statically significant differences are found in large classes instructors' beliefs towards their performance due to educational level variable in favor of PhD holders. The results of this research paper can be considered as a step forward towards a better understanding of the beliefs of large classes instructors at Yarmouk University.

Recommendations

This study provides information about the beliefs of EFL instructors at Yarmouk University in Jordan towards teaching large classes. Instructors showed some important beliefs which can be considered in class size context and, thus, more studies in different subject areas can be conducted.

The issue of large classes teaching should be addressed adequately as it affects the teachers' beliefs about teaching. However, the limitations in this research area can't be ignored. To better understand the teachers' beliefs towards large classes, longitudinal studies with a larger number of participants and a well-designed questionnaire are needed to depict a more holistic picture of these beliefs and classroom decisions.

Moreover, lecturers should be trained to teach in large classes because they might encounter some difficulties while teaching such classes if they don't have enough skills on how to teach in large class environment

Furthermore, decreasing the number of students inside the class and increasing the number of instructors is also recommended in this area to avoid the problem of large class. Also, the university authorities are kindly recommended to provide instructors with the appropriate teaching facilities that enable them to deal with any obstacles that they may face when they are obliged to teach large classes.

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