

## The Impact of Class Size on Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language: The Case of the Department of English at Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University

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### Abstract

This paper is devoted to the study of the impact of class size on teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The investigation was conducted at the department of English at Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University. The department has witnessed a huge increase in the enrolment figure in the past decade which resulted into an increase in class sizes. This has created problems for staff and students alike. Despite the steps taken by the administrators to reduce the number of students, the problem of class crowding still persists. The department of English, alone, has an enrolment of almost 3000 students, it is a huge number indeed if we take into consideration the availability of facilities and resources. The aim of this study is to explore the organizational and pedagogical difficulties that are frequently encountered by the teachers dealing with large classes and the effects on student learning. Additionally, this paper proposes some suggestions on how to deal with class overcrowding. As part of our research, we have given questionnaires to 200 students and 40 teachers. The findings of the survey clearly demonstrate that large class sizes have an adverse impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

*Keywords:* Class size, overcrowded classes, teaching English in large classes

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## Introduction

Since the twenties, scholars, teachers and experts, in the domain of education, have been concerned with the investigation of the factors associated with the teaching and the learning processes. One of the main issues has been the impact of class size on the learner achievements. According to Messineo et al. (2007) "Interest in the impact of class size on teaching and learning has emerged since the twenties" (P. 126). Indeed, several studies, mainly on undergraduate learners, have been conducted (Edmondson & Mulder, 1924; Glass & Smith, 1979; Hedges & Stock, 1983). Although the issue seems more complicated at tertiary level, much of the investigations were conducted in elementary and secondary schools. Kerr (2011) points out that "fewer studies have assessed the impact of class size on the learning experience and outcomes in the postsecondary context, and even fewer still in the Canadian or Ontario context" (P.3).

Research on the effect of class size on student performance has resulted into rather controversial notions, definitions and opinions. The intersection of the factor of class size with a variety of other factors was one of the reasons behind such a controversy. There was not a consensus among researchers about the definition of large class. Kerr notes that the definition differs according to the discipline, the level and nature of the class and the perceptions of lecturers and individual students. He argues that a large class may include an introductory class of 700 students or an upper year seminar with fifty. Similarly, in some countries, 25-30 students per one teacher could be considered large, while in other countries this is seen to be normal or even quite small. Mulryan-Kyne (2010) admits that it is not that easy to determine exactly what constitutes a large class, mainly in a tertiary level education context.

Opinions have then varied across disciplines and education levels. In addition to the number of students, other factors such as the teacher competency, the availability of resources have been associated to the investigation of the impact of class size on student learning. Class size, according to Blatchford, Moriarty, Edmonds, & Martin (2002) is a very important environmental factor that influences teachers and pupils in a number of ways, however, the other contextual factors should not be ignored. In the same vein, Mulryan-Kyne (2010), argues that there are several factors that should be considered as relevant such as the nature of the programme or course being taught, the accommodation and facilities that are available and the resources needed. For example, meeting the needs of a class of 50 in a science laboratory designed for 30 is likely to be more challenging than presenting a history lecture to 220 students in a lecture room designed for 200. "The great challenge to experts, scholars and teachers was to provide sufficient evidence to identify the connection between class size and student achievement"(Mulryan-Kyne, 2010, P. 176).

In the view of Biggs (1999), the practical problems faced by students and teachers increase and change in their nature as class size increases, especially in tertiary level institutions where the student population is more diverse and the teaching staff have to deal with a variety of factors, such as student ability, background, age and experience. There is no doubt, according to Biggs, that these factors should be taken into consideration while designating a class as large or

'too large' however, the skills, competencies and ability of the lecturer are also important factors. Many studies have recognized the central role of the teacher in promoting the quality of education. Indeed, many studies have shown that teacher competency is a more significant determinant of student learning than class size. McKeachie (1990) argues that although there are both practical and theoretical reasons why class size should make a difference at tertiary level, in the end, it is the skill and competency of the teacher that counts. The same view is supported by Nomaye (2006) who notes that "What counts is not the size of the class, but the quality of the teaching" (P.1). Baldwin (1993) focuses on this particular issue. In his study, he investigates whether a qualified teacher with an excellent reputation as a lecturer could do better in a mass lecture section than doctoral students with smaller sections. Baldwin concludes that there is no significant difference in students' performance. Similarly, Hill (1998) does not recognise any performance advantages for small classes. Other researchers have attempted to support the idea that a large class impact negatively on teaching and learning by focusing on the problems that teachers and students meet in large classes. Problems such as anonymity and passivity among students, poor engagement of student with course content, low motivation and low participation level are the consequences of being taught in large classes (Biggs, 1999; Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Ward & Jenkins, 1992).

Much of the available literature on class size also focuses on the choice of methods and tools. Wanous, Procter & Murshid (2009) point out that "large class size is increasingly less accepted as an excuse for not adopting new more effective approaches" (P.79). This view is supported by Pedder (2006) who notes that if we take into account the fact that teachers who teach different subjects and work in different contexts can bring different strengths and expertise to the classroom and that their pupils come to class with different personalities, behavioural and cognitive capacities, we will not be surprised if we find teachers maximising opportunities for pupils to learn in classes of different size in different ways.

This study makes clear that learning in a large class impacts negatively on the student performance. It is an exploration of the organizational and pedagogical difficulties that are frequently encountered by the teachers dealing with large classes and the effects on student learning. It is also an investigation of the approaches and strategies adopted by the teachers to handles difficulties encountered in such contexts.

### **Some Facts about Tertiary Education in Algeria**

Tertiary education in Algeria has witnessed a move from the traditional structure to the three-cycle Bachelor, Master and doctorate system. The 'LMD' system has gradually been implemented since September 2004. The investigation of the consequences of the reform on educational quality is still ongoing. In Algeria, the enrolment process has always been subject to availability of places at university which, in turn, is related to the number of students who pass their baccalaureate exams at the end of the high school. Since 2004, the success rates have increased dramatically. The highest success rate, since independence in 1962, was in 2012, with 62, 45%. The increase in the number of baccalaureate holders has obviously led to an increase in the number of university students. Most of the institutions have responded to these pressures,

mainly by increasing average class sizes. Despite the several measures taken by the ministry of higher education to increase the number of the teaching staff, most of the universities still face a shortage of teachers. This shortage is mainly due to the doubling in the number of students which is, in turn, is affected by the flexibility of the criteria of selection. Indeed, in Algeria, every holder of the baccalaureate or an equivalent foreign certificate can easily matriculate free of charge at a university institution. The criteria for the choice of course include the student's wishes, the nature of the baccalaureate or other qualifying certificate, the student's marks or grades in the relevant subjects and the number of places available in every specific course. Unfortunately, most of Algerian universities and institutions do not respond to these criteria in the same way and do not adopt the same mechanism of selection. As a consequence, in some faculties the class size has increased dramatically in the last few years.

### **The Department of English at AbdelhamidIbnBadis University**

The department of English has witnessed a huge increase in the enrolment figures over the two last decades. Until recently, the number of places available in the courses offered at the level of the department was not taken into consideration. Table 1 provides sufficient evidence of the connection between the LMD system, the success level in the baccalaureate and the figures of enrolment.

Table 1. *Enrolment data*

Academic year	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Number of EFL Students	1230	1208	1525	1702	1827	1967	2373	2456	2430	1609
level of success in the baccalaureate	42.5%	37,29%	51,95%	53,27%	50%	45,1%	61,2%	62,45%	58,84%	44,72%

Since 2004, the number of teachers has also increased remarkably. From four to eleven teachers are recruited every year. In September 2013, seven teachers were recruited and the teaching staff currently includes 52 teachers.

As shown in table 1, the number of students hit its peak in 2012 as a consequence to the rise in success level in the 2012 baccalaureate session. The university started with a series of measures since September 2011, when the faculty of science and technology responded to the request of the faculty of letters and arts by accepting to receive, for one year, almost 1500 English language students. In September 2012, an agreement, signed between AbdelhamidIbnBadis University and three other universities, allowed 500 new students to join any of the three departments of English. In September 2013, the faculty of letters and arts, with 7200 students, was considered as the largest faculty and the department of English as the largest with 1609 students, followed by the department of French with 1650 students, the department of Arabic literature with 1300 students, the department of Spanish with 1037 students, and the

department of Arts with 500 students. In July, 2013 a decision was made to relocate the department of English to a separate building at the recently founded faculty of medicine for four years until the establishment of the faculty of foreign languages in 2017.

For the first time since the implementation of the LMD system in 2004, the number of first year students has remarkably decreased. Here again, the decrease in the enrolments was related to the success level in the 2013 baccalaureate session. The number hit its peak in the year 2011-2012 with 900 students. Table 2 demonstrates a decrease in the number of students in tutorial groups in 2013.

Table 2. *Number of students per group*

Academic year	2009 2010	2010 2011	2011 2012	2012 2013	2013 2014
1 <sup>st</sup> year	45	47	45	45	15
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	44	45	45	44	30

The decrease in the number of new students and the availability of enough classrooms and lecture halls in the new building at the faculty of medicine have contributed to reducing the tutorial group size. However, it is still worth investigating the difficulties still encountered by teachers and students in large lecture sections, especially in the third year class which contains more than 600 students.

### Method

Data were collected through the use of two questionnaires (see Appendices A, B). One questionnaire was given to 200 students from the first, the second and the third year bachelor. The participants comprise 138 females and 62 male. Another one was given to 40 teachers. Both questionnaires contain open-ended, multiple-choice, and scalar response and they revolve around the following issues:

- Assessment and class size: quality of assessment, assessment workload, providing feedback, standardization of assessment and marking, assessment workload;
- Feelings of isolation & anonymity in large classes;
- Controlling absenteeism in large classes;
- Exchanges between teachers and students;
- Difficulties encountered by teachers in large classes;
- Difficulties encountered by students in large classes.

### Results

Out of the 40 teachers surveyed, 35 report that not all of the third year modules should be taught by means of lectures only; modules such as research methodology and discourse analysis should be supported by tutorials. Teaching skills such as speaking and writing should be taught in smaller classes. The modules that must be taught by means of tutorials are: grammar, written expression, oral expression, research methodology, English for specific purposes, discourse analysis, morpho-syntax and lexical-semantics.

All the students report that large classes are particularly very noisy. Out of the 200 students surveyed, 169 students report that they prefer small classes; as learners of a foreign language, they really need to be actively involved. 180 students believe that certain modules such as: written expression oral expression, methodology, and phonetics should be taught in very

small classes and the number of the students should not exceed 15. Only 22 students say that they prefer large classes because they are university students and learning in a crowded lecture hall is much more motivating, exciting and challenging. Only 3 out of 200 students say they prefer experiencing learning in both small and large classes. For 39 out of 40 teachers, the size of class really matters and it does affect their choices while selecting the teaching method (40); while designing the course-unit (13); while allocating students to groups (40); while allocating assignments (40), while assessing students (40) and while using visual aids and other resources (8). The participants on the whole declare that they have already experienced teaching in large classes, and except two, they have all met difficulties. All of the teachers report that they have not been trained on how to teach large classes. When asked whether they are satisfied with the size of tutorials, 21 teachers respond negatively. Twenty-three report they are not satisfied with the current size of the classes apart from the first year classes. All the teachers surveyed declare that they would prefer small classes if they were given a choice.

As regard class attendance, 155 students out of 200 report that they skip class more easily in a small class than in a large one. 88 informants consider that the department's attendance policy is unsatisfactory while 59 evaluate it as good and 35 evaluate it as very good. For 36 teachers, absenteeism is not tolerated. According to 38 teachers, it is not an easy task to track students' attendance in large classes.

Ninety-four out of 200 students believe that grading in class is sometimes fair, for 50 students, it is usually fair, for 32, it is rarely fair, for 18, it is always fair and for 6 students, it is never fair. With regard the feedback provided by grading, most of the students report that it is most of the time oral. 99 students report that the feedback is good, 69 students say it is poor, 20 students say it is fair and only 13 students say it is excellent.

The majority of the teachers who responded to the question related to assessment declare that class size affect the choice of methods, materials and assignments. It is only in small classes, for example, that they can ask their students to prepare tutorial presentations and produce essays. A minority of the informants report that standardization of assessment and marking is possible in large classes. The assignments provided in class are evaluated positively by 120 students who consider them as relevant to the objectives of the courses. For 18 students, the assignments are rather excessive.

As regard the exchanges between the students and their teachers, various answers have been provided. The most negative evaluation (Poor) is provided by 80 students, where as the most positive one (excellent) is proposed by 21 students only. Unlike the students, the teachers' answer is the other way around; 36 teachers believe that the teachers- students relations are rather good.

For 155 students, it really matters that the teachers know their names. Surprisingly, 9 students report that all teachers know their names and 51 students say their names are not known by any teacher. As regard the teachers, most of them report that they do care about knowing the names of their students.

The problems that students encounter in large classes include: noise, distraction, unfair assessment, lack of motivation, lack of self confidence and isolation. The solutions suggested by 188 out of 200 students are:

- Large classes should be divided into smaller groups.
- Some lectures must be supported by tutorials, especially methodology and phonology.
- The number of students in tutorial groups should not exceed 15.
- Lecturers should offer students more opportunities to express their ideas and discuss controversial issues.

The problems encountered by teachers in large classes include lack of opportunities to get to know students, reduced motivation, reduced level of active involvement, reduced quality of interaction and reduced opportunities to work on cognitive skills and increased behavioural problems. Increased student diversity as a result of greater student numbers is also a frequently cited issue.

To improve the large class experience, all the surveyed teachers suggest the following solutions:

- The classroom should be selected according to the learning goals and instructional objectives. Teaching oral expression, for instance requires particular resources. The teachers recommend that enough space should be allowed for students to move around, to perform songs and to act out role-plays.
- Teachers should work co-operatively to develop different and practical types of continuous assessment.
- Teachers should use a variety of teaching methods and strategies
- For a good class management, teachers should set rules of acceptable behaviour
- Teachers with little experience should be assisted by teachers with greater experience and training.
- Teachers should adopt approaches that offer active learning.
- Teachers must conduct research into pedagogy and keep up with recent advances in pedagogical approaches and new technologies to improve the large class experience.

### **Discussion**

The results suggest that class size plays an important role in the learning and teaching processes. Most of the teachers, in the department of English, have already experienced teaching in large classes and the problems they have encountered clearly back up the assumption that class size has an impact on the student achievement. The class size affects the teacher's choices and decisions. Most of them, if not all, believe that large classes require greater investment of time and resources. For many teachers, finding efficient ways and time to communicate with a greater number of students, to assess their performance and to correct hundreds of exam papers is a great challenge. Blatchford et al. (2002) drew similar conclusions. Their study of English infant schools provided consistent evidence that in small classes more teaching took place; children were more likely to interact with their teachers, as they were more often the focus of a teacher's attention.

In large classes, students are more likely to skip classes. Indeed, attendance in such context is very difficult to control. Most of the teachers believe that absenteeism should not be tolerated in the department and that an efficient attendance system should be implemented. They believe that the students who do not attend classes regularly miss opportunities to learn from their teachers and their peers as well, and those who attend classes regularly have a better chance to learn the curriculum. Findings of several studies have demonstrated a correlation between attendance and grades (Silvestri, 2003; Hammen & Kelland, 1994; Callahan, 1993; Van Blerkom, 1992). Attendance should then be controlled at least in tutorials where the number of attendants is reduced and where students are offered more opportunities to acquire the relevant academic skills such as responding to questions, thinking critically, evaluating, interpreting, processing and synthesizing information, drawing conclusions and practicing the language in different contexts of use. Learners of a foreign language should be given more opportunities to practice the skills acquired more frequently and both orally and in writing.

The teachers are unanimous in the view that for the third year of study, the modules should not be taught by means of lectures only or at least the lectures should be followed by discussions. Students need to be actively engaged in the lesson and should be able to participate in class discussion and ask and answer questions.

One of the most critical problems faced by students in large classes is the feeling of isolation. Students are not only anonymous to both the teachers but to one another, too. Indeed, students who perceive that they are anonymous often feel less personal responsibility for learning, have decreased motivation to learn, and attend class less frequently (Cooper, MacGregor, Smith, & Robinson, 2000).

The results suggest that the teachers prefer rather small classes. The justification they provide is that in large classes they are exposed to rather a heterogeneous context. It is a real challenge for them to meet all the students' needs or to establish rules and norms. Another point is that teaching modules like: lexical semantic, morpho-syntax, written expression, research methodology or even American, British and African civilization, requires particular efforts such as: encouraging group work, encouraging debates and arranging seating.

Assessment in general and continuous assessment in particular, is also affected by class size. It is not an easy task to develop effective activities. Teachers should receive adequate training to develop appropriate assessment tools and use appropriate means to provide feedback. The answers provided by students clearly show that teachers should do their best to provide enough written feedback instead of using the class size as an excuse. Overall, these findings were consistent with previous research that suggests that class sizes do affect students and instructors in a number of ways (Biggs, 1999; Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Ward & Jenkins, 1992).

## Conclusion

The study was conducted to show how the teachers and students, at the department of English at Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University, deal with the problem of class overcrowding.

The results demonstrate that class size can affect teaching and learning in different ways. A class with large numbers of students lead to increased number of academic and pedagogical issues, which in turn, lead to increased administration and management responsibilities. While



the students complain of lack of opportunities to express themselves, the teachers complain of passive engagement on the part of students. A minority of teachers advocates the assumption that large numbers of students in class provide opportunities for positive teaching and learning experiences. They believe that diversity in large classes can offer a chance to explore multiple perspectives on course content. Similarly, a few students acknowledge that studying in large classes is more interesting and challenging.

Dealing with large classes requires coordination, management and training. Every teacher can develop the approach that works best for him/her, based on his/her teaching style, students' needs and capacities, the goals and objectives of the curriculum.

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## Appendices

### *Questionnaires used in the study*

#### Appendix A.

#### Questionnaire for Teachers

Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University  
Faculty of letters and arts  
Department of English

This study is an attempt to explore the experience of teaching and learning in large size classes. Your co-operation in completing this study by responding to the following questions would be greatly appreciated. Please do not put your name on the questionnaire since all the responses are confidential and anonymous.

Gender: M\_\_ F\_\_

Years of teaching experience: \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching position: Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Specialization \_\_\_\_\_

1) Should all the third year modules be taught by means of lectures?

Yes No

2) Which lectures should be supported by tutorials?

.....  
.....  
.....

Which modules should be taught by means of tutorials only?

.....  
.....

3) Does the class size matter?

Yes No

4) Have you had the opportunity to teach large size classes?

Yes No

5) Have you ever faced difficulties in large classes?

Yes No

6) Have you been trained on how to teach large classes?

Yes No

7) Are you satisfied with the size of tutorials groups?

Yes No

8) Are you satisfied with the current size of the classes that you now teach?

Yes No

9) If you were given a choice, you would choose :

A small class A large class

10) Does the size of the class affect your choice while (you may select more than one response)

\*Selecting the teaching method?

\*Designing the course- unit?

\*Allocating students to groups?

\*Allocating assignment?

\*Assessing students?

\*Using visual aids and other resources?

Other.....  
.....

11) Is your assessment/evaluation affected by the size of the class?

Yes No

12) Do you think that standardization of assessment and marking is possible in large classes?

Yes No

13) Do you ask your students to prepare tutorial presentations and produce essays?

Yes No

14) Is your choice of an assignment affected by the class size?

Yes No

15) Do you tolerate absenteeism ?

Yes

No

16) Is it easy to control absenteeism in large classes?

Yes

No

17) How would you evaluate the exchanges between students and teachers?

Excellent

Good

Satisfactory

Fair

Poor

18) Do you care about knowing the names of your students ?

Yes

No

19) What are the other difficulties that a teacher may experience while teaching a large class?

.....

Which practical tips do you suggest for teaching large classes?

.....

\*\*\*\*\*THANK YOU\*\*\*\*\*

**Appendix B.**

**Questionnaire for Students**

Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University  
Faculty of letters and arts  
Department of English

This study is an attempt to explore the experience of teaching and learning in large size classes. Your co-operation in completing this study by responding to the following questions would be greatly appreciated. Please do not put your name on the questionnaire since all the responses are confidential and anonymous.

1. Gender: I am: Male Female

2. I am presently in my:  
1st Year 2nd Year 3rd Year

3. Do you prefer large classes or small classes? .....

4. Which problems do you face in large classes?  
.....  
.....

5. How would you evaluate the department's attendance policy?  
Excellent very good good fair unsatisfactory

6. Do you skip classes in a large class than in a small class?  
Yes No

7. The grading in class is  
Always fair usually fair sometimes fair rarely fair never fair

8. How would you rate the quality of feedback provided by grading (oral/written)?

