Nouvelle Revue Synergies Canada

Outwit, Outlast, Outplay: Survival Techniques (for Teachers and Students) in the Large Language Classroom

Teresa Lobalsamo and Ramón A. Victoriano-Martínez

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Article abstract

What once began as experimental has now become a trend whereby large classes (50 students or more) are the norm. Language classes, where a small student body is ever more preferred, is also part of the same growing movement. Literature tells us, however, that students feel the larger the size of the class, the more negatively it will affect their ability to learn; yet, universities are reluctant to provide the small classes that are essential for an effective and organic learning environment.

The following paper provides readers with 1. a brief summary of the research conducted on the effectiveness or otherwise of large classes; 2. practices that the authors have found to be most effective for the successful delivery of a large language class - practices which can also be implemented in lectures with fewer students.

Outwit, Outlast, Outplay: Survival Techniques (for Teachers and Students) in the Large Language Classroom

Teresa Lobalsamo and Ramón A. Victoriano-Martínez
University of Toronto Mississauga
Canada

Introduction

A brief review of pertinent literature reveals that large class sizes can negatively affect students' overall learning experiences. Joe Cuseo identifies eight "deleterious outcomes associated with large-sized classes." Amongst them he notes the possibility of reduced depth of student thinking inside the classroom; reduced breadth and depth of course objectives; course assignments; course-related learning strategies used by students outside the classroom; lower levels of academic achievement (learning) and academic performance (grades) (2). In a large study (490, 196 classrooms) conducted between 2011 and 2012, Steve Benton and William Pallett found that in smaller classes, students were better prepared and more enthusiastic about the learning experience than those who were enrolled in large classes. In fact, Benton writes, "the smaller the class the higher was students' achievement and overall impressions of the course [….] Smaller classes were especially well suited for developing students' creative capacities and oral and written communication skills" ("Class Size").

Smaller classes allow for, amongst other benefits, greater interaction between the learner and the teacher, frequent feedback on the quality of their evaluated materials, and fruitful discussions—all of which contribute to active learning environments, which the student prefers and in which he or she can be more successful (Wulff, Nyquist, Abbott 19). Yet, despite the literature and students' own impressions that the larger the size of the class, the more negatively it will affect their ability to learn (Carbone, Greenberg 314), it would appear that several universities are finding it increasingly difficult to offer courses with twenty or fewer students enrolled. The current large class format, prevalent in many institutions, is a reality which is unlikely to see an end (Cooper, Robinson 2). Ever-resourceful and evolving, instructors are seeking ways to apply the same teaching tools and practices that have long been used in smaller classes, with modifications made to ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate or engage in discussion, in the hopes of creating an active learning environment regardless of volume.

The following paper provides readers with practices that the authors have found to be most effective for a successful delivery of a large class (50 or more students)—practices which can also be implemented in lectures with fewer students. While some may be familiar to readers, as they are firmly grounded in teaching and learning and have been employed in classrooms for years, the authors will highlight those that have been repurposed for specific use in the foreign language classroom.

Tips from a First Year Italian Language Practice Class (University of Toronto Mississauga)

"Around the World"

According to Wulff, Nyquist, and Abbott, student-reported criticism of the large class centred on an overall lack of interaction with their instructor and peers, lessened individual accountability, increased distractions, and a lack of opportunities for questions and discussions, which led to decreased student motivation (19). The authors suggest, appropriately, that it is fundamental to seek ways to provide instructor-student and peer-to-peer interaction, even in a large class context, by placing students in smaller groups. Doing so offers the opportunity for enhanced critical thinking, provides a way for instructors to offer frequent feedback (without having to solely grade individual work), promotes social and emotional development, and it exposes students

---

to different perspectives (Cooper, Robinson 10-13). This collaborative and engaging learning environment ultimately aims to increase students' approximation to and retention of the subject matter.

In a beginner Italian language practice course with a class size of seventy-five, students are invited to travel "Around the World"—a postcard writing activity in which they practice the use of the present perfect (*il passato prossimo*), in small groups of five to six of their peers. During the activity, students are asked to pass around a postcard of an Italian city and to write a sentence that describes an ideal and imaginary vacation to that city. The activity begins with an explanation of the basic concepts of the present perfect, leaving students time to ask questions and to reflect, individually, on the new concepts. Specifically, during this time, students work on applying the new material in a directed exercise that encourages them to employ the past tense to answer questions like "What is the oldest (nicest) city you've ever been to?" This acts as a space for the instructor to verify whether or not students have more questions about the material and ask for volunteers to read a few of their newly created sentences. Students are then divided into groups to apply their new knowledge and new sentences (created during individual time) into the wider postcard exercise. At the end of the time permitted for the group portion of the activity, one person from each group volunteers to read the postcard to the entire class, as the rest are asked to guess the city that is being described. Alternatively, several postcards can be passed throughout the entire class and students contribute a sentence that picks up wherever the last person leaves off.

This activity proved positive in reducing the anxiety often associated with speaking in front of large groups, and encouraged participation in the language of study from nearly the entire class. "Around the World" also allowed those students who freely speak with more ease the opportunity to do so.

Benvenuti al sud (2010): Film Analysis

Gaining insight into a culture is a corner stone of functional competence in a foreign language—not only for linguistic benefit, but also for a deeper, inter- or cross-cultural understanding of target language societies (Tschirner 312-313). With that, the primary goal of studying the film *Benvenuti al sud* is to increase students' cultural awareness in the beginner language course. Every year in which the film is viewed, the instructor seeks to enrich the learners' overall classroom experience by giving consideration to their perceptions of specific aspects of Italian culture with regards to the North and South debate (by answering pre-film viewing questions), by allowing students to assess their own understanding of Italian culture during and after they have watched the movie, and by asking them to reflect on what they understood differently about that culture thanks to the cinematic medium (by answering post-film viewing questions). As Tania Convertini writes, the authenticity of films allows learners to "Enter into a culture, in the way in which people live, dress, eat, and interact" and to act as an "open window on a culture that allows us to get in touch and to understand the values" (23-24).

The use of film also creates emotional connections between it and the learner as well as identification with characters or situations, which often translates into motivation and eagerness to participate, even in the foreign language, when activities are directed at the learners' level of preparation.

Class time is divided in much the same manner as described above whereby the first ten to twenty minutes are used to discuss the North and South debate and to explain in more depth key concepts found in a pre-assigned reading (in English). First, students have time to reflect individually on some pre-viewing activities that ask them to answer directed questions such as, "What do you know (or think you know) about Southern Italy and Northern Italy / Southern Italians and Northern Italians?" Next, students work in small groups to "Graffiti" or brainstorm on paper, either in English or in Italian, their responses to the same questions. In these groups, students are also asked to guess what is happening in a still image taken from the movie.

Once the film has been viewed, together during tutorials, the following lecture is reserved for film analysis. There, students return to the "Graffiti" groups and look at the answers they had brainstormed prior to seeing the film. Here, they discuss whether or not their opinions have changed regarding Southern Italians and Northern Italians and they are also asked to verify their predictions on the still images. All the while, students are encouraged, but not forced, to use key Italian words that recur throughout the film as often as possible.

In terms of an increase in cultural proficiency, the benefits of the film analysis are numerous. Through the contextualization of the material experienced through film, learners express a deeper understanding of the

North and South debate or, as one student stated, "an appreciation for the beauty of the entire country which does not take away from the beauty that each region possesses individually." Learners identify with the characters rather than judge character types. Based on anecdotal findings from past graffiti exercises, students described Southerners more positively and not merely as the stereotypical collective of hapless victims or perpetrators of crimes. Northerners are seen as being equally as caring and not the "cold" or "snobby" individuals that learners had thought they were pre-film.

Free from the pressures of being formally tested, students' language acquisition is enhanced as evidenced by their responses during the prediction and verification exercises. These were well formulated, with proper gender and number agreements, and mastery of recurring vocabulary.

Lexical patterns in the responses collected were so significant as to yield a rich pool of synonymous terms for consideration. Further lessons pertaining to the same film can be modelled around the use of frequent vocabulary translated into the target language to provide more meaningful and more useful word sets for students to use in oral practice and/or writing assignments. For example, terms frequently used by student respondents (such as "warm" / "welcoming") can be used to present learners with new antonyms, viewed as opposing stereotypes. In small groups, students can discuss the provided terms in the target language, sort them into categories under headings such as "positive," "negative," "South" or "North," and be encouraged to brainstorm those descriptors with their peers before producing a piece of written work. Further lexical studies in electronic form (through online surveys) can also be used in future so as to build a larger corpus that will allow the class to explore more elaborate patterns and see frequency of use (through concordance and word tree programs). Such an exercise can provide students with a more extensive and comprehensive set of adjectives and verbs (rather than a traditional list of nouns) that allows learners to express more easily and with more fluency their personal opinions on a given topic, in either an oral or written form.

Tips from a First Year Spanish Language Practice Class (University of Toronto Mississauga)

Since the summer of 2010, students enrolled in Spanish courses at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) have had a significant portion on their mark (between 15% and 30%) evaluated as a homework assignment using an online suite: "iLrn in Spanish for Beginners" (SPA100), "Intermediate Spanish" (SPA220), and "Supersite for Advanced Spanish" (SPA320).

The three courses could be described as hybrid courses (they offer in-class and online time), with class sizes varying from 200 in SPA100 to 15 in SPA320. For the purposes of this discussion, I will concentrate on SPA100 as it offers the most consistent information and it is one in which students have been polled to gauge their initial reaction to the online component of the course.

As noted by Leonard Presby, there has to be a "textbook link" for this type of course to be successful. But while Presby advocated for a textbook that would "supplement the computer" (17), in our courses at UTM the computer supplements the textbook. In the 14 years that have passed since Presby's article, textbooks have evolved substantially. The iLrn "online suite" includes an eBook of the hardcopy textbook, laboratory (audio and oral), and workbook (written) exercises, video tutorial for grammar points, a "self-diagnostic" section, and access to a "Student Companion Website" in which the student has access to more quizzes and exercises as well as flip cards. All these "add-ons" complement the grammar presented in class as well as during tutorials (both of which students have to physically attend).

The primary reason for employing online homework in the introductory course was to better respond to the upward pressure in enrollment in SPA100 sections. Homework exercises are set by the instructor at the beginning of the year and students have a firm deadline for completing each component. In order to keep track of student progress through the grammar components presented in the course, a diminishing number of attempts is assigned to the exercises: three attempts for the first four lessons, two tries for the next four lessons, and one attempt for the final six lessons. This method ensures a more precise evaluation of students' accuracy and mastery in grammar and vocabulary presented throughout the year. The exercises are auto-graded and provide instant feedback.

When the online component of the course was first introduced in 2010, the students were polled by the instructor at the end of the course and the majority of them (59.4%) found the instant feedback for the

assignments to be very useful and 71.9% found that the online component prepared them better for in-class tests and quizzes. Some of the common responses included "More practice = More preparedness = Good mark, Very impressed;" "Extremely helpful with practice;" "It would keep me organized and on top of my work. I think it would also facilitate my learning;" "It provides a lot of practice and helps you focus where you need to focus;" and "It's very helpful to study at home, to correct answers, and to listen to correct pronunciation."

Over the last four years, the average grade for the homework has been 66%, with a completion rate of almost 80% of all assigned exercises. The overall course average of SPA100 has also increased to 70% during the same timeframe.

In their study of hybrid language courses, Ann Chenoweth, Kimmaree Ushida, and Eiko Murday point out that one of the limitations of their findings was that "the students at Carnegie Mellon University are particularly known for their comfort with cutting edge technology. These students might be unusually quick to adapt to using new technology in a course. The results may have been different at a less technocentric university" (133). We could safely assume that this caveat is practically not warranted anymore. With the explosion of social media since the publication of the aforementioned article, our students come to the classroom with the know-how and the skills to handle the technology and interfaces presented to them on the first day of class. This is corroborated by the in-class experience of the authors and by various studies, such as Gaudreau et al. (2013), which points out that "we conceived laptop utilization as ubiquitous and a contemporary mode of learning" (250-251), a behaviour that is typical of "the upcoming generation of multitasking students who were raised using emerging technologies in most areas of their daily lives" (253).

In a hybrid large class of 100 or more students, online assessment and feedback are crucial. In the twenty-first century, students are very familiar with computer-assisted learning (Fried 2006, Gaudreau et al. 2013). Immediate feedback while completing pre-class activities online allows students to self-assess their progress towards the achievement of learning objectives like vocabulary retention and grammar comprehension, and to feel in command of the learning process. Such a method also allows the instructor to start the physical (as opposed to virtual) class with a quick review of previously taught concepts with the certainty that they have been reviewed outside of class time, maximizing the otherwise limited lecture time and space.

Works Cited

Benton, Steve. "Does Class Size Matter?" *IDEA (Improving Learning in Higher Education Since 1975)* (2012): n.p. Web. 1 August 2015.

Benvenuti al sud [Welcome to the South]. Dir. Luca Miniero. Perf. Claudio Bisio, Alessandro Siani, Angela Finocchiaro. Medusa Film, Cattleya, 2010. DVD.

Carbone, Elisa and James Greenberg. "Teaching large classes: Unpacking the problem and responding creatively." *To Improve the Academy*. Ed. M. Kaplan. Vol. 17. (1998): n.p. Web. 13 August 2015.

Chenoweth, Ann, Kimmaree Murday and Eiko Ushida. "Student Learning in Hybrid French and Spanish Courses: An Overview of Language Online." *CALICO Journal* 24.1 (2006): 115–145. Print.

Convertini, Tania. "Insegnare lingua con il cinema: una prospettiva alternativa." *American Association of Teachers of Italian. Italica* 83.1 (2006): 22-33. Print.

Cooper, James L. and Pamela Robinson. "The Argument for Making Large Classes Seem Small." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 81 (2000): 5-16. Print.

Cuseo, Joe. "The Empirical Case Against Large Class Size: Adverse Effects on the Teaching, Learning, and Retention of First Year Students." *Journal of Faculty Development* 21.1 (2007): 5–21. Web. 1 August 2015.

Gaudreau, Patrick, Dave Miranda and Alexandre Gareau, "Canadian university students in wireless classrooms: What do they do on their laptops and does it really matter?" *Computers & Education* 70. (January 2014): 245-255. Print.

Presby, Leonard. "Seven Tips for Highly Effective Online Courses." *Syllabus*, 14.11 (2001): 17. Web. 27 October 2015.

Tschirner, Erwin. "Language Acquisition in the Classroom: The Role of Digital Video." *Computer Assisted Language Learning* 14.3–4 (2001): 305-319. Web. 26 October 2015.

Wulff, Donald H., Jody D. Nyquist, and Robert D. Abbott. "Students' Perceptions of Large Classes." Teaching Large Classes Well. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 32. Ed. M. Weimer. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (1987): n.p. Web. 13 August 2015.