

# Making Language Teaching Fit Large Classes

## 大規模クラスにおける語学教育

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### 要 約

本論は日本において改善の必要性が痛感される大規模クラス向け語学教育の特徴について述べる。

次に、特定の語学学習大規模クラスを例にして、その学習環境の性質を評価するための条件（フレームワーク）を提示する。

このフレームワークには、語学修得能力の促進に有効な七つの項目が挙げられる。

これらの項目には、学生と講師のコミュニケーション・学生間の協力奨励・active learning の促進・敏速なフィードバック・ゆとりを持った学習、そして修得方法の多様性をみとめると共に自己の学習能力への自信をもたせることの必要性が含まれる。

### A B S T R A C T

This paper first describes characteristics of large class language instruction in Japan that are felt to be in need of improvement. It then proposes a framework for evaluating the quality of the environment presented by a specific large class situation. The framework lists seven principles for good practice that have been shown to promote learning. The principles include the need for student-instructor contact, fostering student cooperation, promoting active learning, promptness of feedback, time spent studying, and the need to communicate high expectations as well as respect for diverse ways of learning.

### Introduction

One of the stated aims of second language instruction is to improve student ability to utilize the learned language. Another purpose is to promote international understanding and acceptance of other cultures by making language learners able to communicate with people of backgrounds other than the own.

For English language instruction in Japan this ideal is often not fulfilled. Students invest much effort in the study of foreign languages with very little to show in return and it often appears that the view of 'the other' becomes more removed and less 'international' as a result. To an observer it is surprising that despite the little success, no serious effort is invested in changing the classroom environments and ways of teaching that are everywhere agreed upon to be in need of such.

Internationally, the events of the last months of 2001 have highlighted the need for communica-

tion among people aimed at achieving acceptance and understanding of the positions taken by geographically removed entities. This urgent need should impel language teachers to think about how efficient their classrooms are in relation to student learning and as contributors to a worldwide civil society.

This paper proposes a framework for evaluating classroom environments in all language learning situations in order to diagnose the relative 'health' of specific language learning situations.

There still remains the need to establish the importance of the language teaching professional as an internationally responsible agent for integration and progress, rather than as an agent for limiting access to a prized commodity.

### The situation in large classes

This paper will discuss concerns for teaching languages in large classes in schools, with a focus on the situation in Japan. It proposes the application of seven principles for good practice in higher education and hopefully it will encourage instructors to consider the activities going on in language learning classes in a broader manner than maybe is the case at present.

A comment on class size may be in place here. Research has not determined that certain class sizes are large and others small, however it appears that all instructors have ideas about which class size is large for them and which is just right (for them). The research found that classes that are too large (intimidating?) for an instructor are generally larger than the class size usually taught by this instructor. Classes that are considered small (non-intimidating?) are generally somewhat smaller than the classes an instructor is usually teaching.

Teaching languages at public institutions in Japan and many other countries differs from the arrangements that students learning languages would elect to conduct their studies in if they had the choice. Classes are generally large, they take place at set times and are often scheduled just once a week. If a student is absent the class goes on, if it is the instructor who is ill or otherwise indisposed the class is canceled, and on holidays classes do not meet. Students do not generally have any voice in class size or other practical arrangements of classes either.

There may be quite substantial periods of time between classes for some students as a result of holidays and absences, and in any one lesson, the instructor cannot expect that students have taken part in the previous class.

Further, in the language learning classes considered here, there is usually no attention placed on putting students of similar abilities together in the same class. Rather the group of students that make up a class will be a 'random' selection of a pool of students at the institution.

So, in the kind of class considered here there are more students than the instructor is comfortable with, there is no assurance that students know what happened in the previous class which may further have happened several weeks before, and there is a wide variety of student abilities present in the class. Summing up, the authorities assigning students to a class have made no real

attempt to accommodate students as unique learners or to create an optimally beneficial learning environment.

From the student point of view there are many more fellow students than would make it realistic to expect individual attention from the instructor, the material covered in a class period may appear 'out of the blue,' and this material may not be at the competence level of the student. It may be much too difficult, even impenetrable for one student, or very easy, even boring for a more able student.

The most common way of overcoming or dealing with this less than ideal situation is achieved by the instructor setting a text that is then followed with maybe supplementary materials added. This makes it possible for instructors to let students know in advance what material will be covered in a class and students then appear to have the option of actively taking part in the class or not engaging with the material as aptitude or interests dictate.

Language instruction practice may further follow a specific method or procedures that have gained currency among instructors. One such approach that is currently popular is to focus on strategies for learning. With a focus on learner strategies the instructor with the many students may elicit such strategies from students and require their use, or the instructor may present a limited number of 'accepted' learner strategies and ask all students to follow these. There appears to be little attention paid to adapting methods to individual students or accommodating 'deviating' ways of learning.

Further approaches to accommodating perceived student needs may entirely abandon a focus on language learning. An instructor may justify classroom practices by claiming to instill life skills through translating classics of English language literature or by spending time with mim-mem work to improve student pronunciation. An occasionally heard excuse for teaching basic grammar structures at the tertiary level (where students have already completed six or more years of language instruction) is to prepare them for lessons with 'foreign' teachers who, students are told, will not brook or comprehend faulty grammar.

It would be ungenerous to doubt the sincerity of instructors pursuing study in the ways described above, it is however doubtful whether these approaches are in the best interest of student language learning.

The excuses offered for pursuing the ways above can seem spurious and may even appear to be an attempt to avoid language study or prevent students from ever achieving higher levels of proficiency in target language. It may be assumed however that this is just the way this instructor has come to approach teaching and learning, and in the best interests of the student an attempt is made to instill similar ways/attitudes in the students.

When inquiring further why various approaches (methods and ways) are adopted and explicated one will be told that they are in the best interests of the students. The respondent may drop the names of eminent linguists who have sprouted similar ideas to assure us that nothing untoward is going on. When further asked how the different elements tie together and feed back into

improved student proficiency the same reasons are repeated and the sincerity, or even sanity, of the questioner is doubted. What has been said has been said on the authority of eminent scholars and while the benefits may not be obvious to ordinary language teaching practitioners, every effort must be made to execute the received ways.

One reason why instructors are not called to task for this rampant rationalization is a lack of commonly agreed on baselines for what should go on in the classroom and for how students should be treated.

Other fields of instruction discuss such principles for good practice and in proposing and evaluating methods and procedures in these non-language acquisition fields, the presenters of methods and procedures are required to justify their ways in terms of such principles of good practice.

The following will present one such set of guidelines for best practices in the classroom and provide a discussion of how these would be expressed in the large classes described above.

It is hoped that language instructors will incorporate these in their thoughts of what is acceptable and possible also in large classes.

### A standard for evaluating classroom environments and procedures

The seven principles for good practices in undergraduate education were proposed by Chickering and Gamson (1991) are as follows :

- 1 Encourage student-faculty contact ;
- 2 Encourage cooperation among students ;
- 3 Encourage active learning ;
- 4 Give prompt feedback ;
- 5 Emphasize time on task ;
- 6 Communicate high expectations ;
- 7 Respect diverse talent and ways of learning.

The seven points will be discussed separately below to better understand how attention to these seven points will benefit thinking about what should be practiced and what could be acceptable in large classes.

#### Encourage student-faculty contact

Student faculty contact is often limited to a few students in the large classes considered here. The great mass of students attend classes and do not interact with the instructor, who is lecturing and not acknowledging the presence of the students directly.

It would be possible to set aside time when students are engaged in self-study and where the instructor is free to not lecture but is available to respond to individual students who have questions. The instructor may then actively approach students to make sure that all have had opportunity to interact with the instructor. This can also be achieved by engaging students when handing

back assignments or in other structured ways that do not demand great courage or initiative by student or instructor.

In this way the psychological distance between student and instructor would diminish, instructors would come to listen to student queries, and in responding to such queries become more sensitive and better able to respond to student needs.

### **Encourage cooperation among students**

The flow of information in large classes is overwhelmingly one-way, from the instructor to the students. The previous principle stresses the importance of two-way communication, and in Principle 2 a further avenue of communication in the classroom is stressed, having students cooperate to help and assist each other in the learning.

Creating situations where students can learn from each other is not always simple, but examples where this is achieved in the language classroom abound. There is pair work in oral communication classes, and similar situations can be created in classes concentrating on other skills. Requiring students to hand in 'communally' completed assignments is one such way but just having students working on individualized assignments will give rise to discussion of the assignments among them, discussion where the topic is not everyday small-talk (a feature of classrooms with one-way communication) but which deals with the assignment at hand.

Peer correction of compositions and generally involving students in evaluating what takes place in the classroom will also effect cooperation without placing stress on just paying attention to the mistakes of peers.

Incorporating student-student interaction in the classroom work, and encouraging such interactions will teach students not to rely on the instructor exclusively, and also free the instructor for other urgent tasks (like suggested for Principle 1 above).

### **Encourage active learning**

One approach to language teaching in a lecture format is to introduce material in 'teach-apply-test' cycles. Here the instructor provides a problem, provides its solution, and has a test ready to check student mastery of the problem.

Teaching in this manner does not leave much room for student initiative and to ensure a good spread of grades no real mastery is aimed for either. Instead it would be possible to set goals to be achieved by students, accept a variety of responses, and use these to instill confidence in student competence.

There will be matters that some students cannot handle on their own, and here the instructor is available or students may be encouraged to consult each other as suggested for Principle 2.

Leaving students to do the work 'alone' is, initially at least, probably more time consuming than just telling them what to do. However when students get used to working on their own and when the tasks have been designed to be doable, they would result in learning at the students' profi-

ciency level. When only the instructor presents problems the problems are not necessarily problems for the students and often need not be studied as problems at all.

### **Give prompt feedback**

Providing prompt feedback to written assignments is probably not a serious problem in large classes. The volume of material to be corrected may be large but anecdotal evidence seems to imply that instructors are conscientious paper graders.

Responding to questions when addressing the full class is also generally competently achieved although the number of questions in this mode is much smaller than the volume of incomprehension of all the students. This incomprehension and lack of engagement in the study is anecdotally shown by students who prepare for other classes during lectures and similar.

Giving feedback in relation to problems and questions that arise in class for students would be difficult to deal with for the instructor with many students. Without the instructor paying special attention to dealing with student feedback, feedback will often be limited to the few students who insist on explanations and the majority will be left out.

However, when Principle 1 is firmly established and the instructor makes sure that there is time to respond to queries even very minor problems can be dealt with as they arise, and they need not take up the time of the whole class.

### **Emphasize time on task**

Administrative concerns generally demand a specified number of classroom hours for a course but do not verify that anything in particular goes on in this time. Maybe as a result of this instructors are often late at the start of class, a class may end early, and reading the roll is given prominence at the beginning of class.

All this is very well if students are engaged in some useful activity during the time the instructor is not teaching or assigning work. Productive study at such times would be possible when students have been given the option to perform some study activity while the instructor is getting ready.

However, making sure that students are engaged in study from the moment the bell rings is a challenge for the instructor. A few minutes of lost study time in each lesson with several dozens of students adds up to hours of study time lost over a whole year, and ensuring that students are studying from the beginning of the lesson is not really difficult if the instructor decides to have students work from the start of the lesson. Planning is however necessary as well as students must be trained to go to work from the start of a lesson.

To ensure that students are engaged in study activities at all times, it is probably necessary for the instructor to be available at the start of class, as well as to provide activities that students can work with on their own while classroom management duties are being attended to.

Time studying does not equal time spent in the classroom. Students must be offered a chance

to be engaged in activities that further the study as far as is possible.

### Communicate high expectations

One characteristic of language teachers, English teachers in Japan certainly, is their professed inability to use English. They may be able to use English but verbally will stress the poverty of their linguistic abilities.

It is maybe surprising that some students still display high expectations and motivation towards the study of English with such leadership, but the despair at ever learning English of the majority of students may be seen as a result of the unwillingness of teachers to profess mastery of their subject. Communicating high expectations does not mean that language ability must be good, it only need to be said to be good and confidence be displayed in teaching/using English. Maybe in the general social environment where we function this may be too much to ask. However, professionalism would seem to require language teachers to profess to a good knowledge of the subject they have been put in charge of.

Disdain for some aspect of linguistic ability, verbal communication (conversation) or 'light' reading matter (non-classic literature) for example, would not seem to be a responsible attitude for a professional language teacher. In what other subject would it be possible to boast of a poor ability in the field where one has been put on the podium to teach and given authority to grade students, while at the same time prescribing what is acceptable as objects of study?

This principle stresses the need for instruction to be infused with a measure of excellence, real or perceived, and it is the responsibility of the instructor to ensure that this is seen to be the case.

### Respect diverse talent and ways of learning

Students come with many abilities and they approach language study with a wide range of hopes and concerns. Still the usual approach to teaching in large classes is to provide a single way of instruction and one way of evaluation, something that will be disadvantageous to a very large number of the students in a class.

An urgent issue in most language learning situations is to focus on providing for a variety of student preferences and talents without enforcing learning styles that students are not comfortable with.

### Final remarks

Proposals for how to conduct language classes generally address one or a few of the seven points discussed above. The principles not addressed are left to sort themselves out, leaving these dimensions of student learning unattended.

It would probably be difficult to find instructors who are in active disagreement with any of the seven principles so it should not present any great extra effort to require that all the principles are

clearly attended to and incorporated in ideas for how to conduct classes.

When attempting to assess the teaching that an instructor is engaged in, a sound beginning would be to keep the principles in mind when interacting with the students and when listening to what the students say. Students will however often have been conditioned to specific ways of thinking about learning and only by paying attention to these will it be possible to change well learned attitudes, where that is necessary.

With a firm grasp of which of the principles are not addressed in a teaching situation it becomes possible to focus on these and not be distracted by the elements that are not in need of improvement. When all principles need attention it is equally possible to address them one or two at a time and through a resolution of some issues become able to move on to those not attended yet.

An optimum teaching environment only rarely happens accidentally. It is nearly always created, and only by a conscious and continuous effort by instructor, students, and school administration. Actively ensuring that the seven principles for good practice are being/becoming implemented will however ensure a better learning environment for the students. Through the interaction that is created at all levels in this manner, large class education will gain in usefulness and this will also ensure that the education/learning going on there is not limiting or creating isolated alienated students.

The seven principles were originally published here :

Chickering A.W. & Gamson, Z.F. (1991) Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, in A.W. Chickering & Z.F. Gamson (Eds.) *Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* . New Directions for Teaching and Learning No. 47 pp. 63-69 (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).