Chapter 11

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ADAPTING INDIVIDUALIZATION TECHNIQUES FOR LARGE CLASSES

In his research findings based on responses from nonnative teachers of English from Indonesia, Japan, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa, Coleman (1989) lists four problems faced by teachers of large classes (100+). First, they feel self-conscious, nervous, and uncomfortable; it is indeed tiring to be the constant focus of 100+ pairs of eyes for three to four periods a day. Secondly, large classes pose disciplinary and class-management problems, in which the noise level must be kept down so as not to disturb others. Thirdly, it is difficult to evaluate the oral or written work of so many learners; teachers of large classes seem to be buried under an endless pile of homework. And lastly, teachers feel that because individual attention cannot be given, very little learning takes place.

From 1983 to 1985, as a part of my studies for a master’s degree at Sydney University (Sarwar 1983–85), I designed and executed a research project entitled “Teaching English as a Foreign Language with Limited Resources.” One of the aims of the research was to experiment with communicative language techniques and activities that would be effective in large classes of 100+. Communicative techniques would naturally include the broad concept of individualization. Finding effective techniques for large classes was a special concern in order to examine the teachers’ popular belief that in large classes learning is nominal and the interactive approach, relying on group/pair work, is not possible.

The concept of individualization

Before outlining my research and describing the tasks and activities that encouraged individualization in my learners, I want to clarify my terms of reference for the concept of individualization. The umbrella title, individualization, covers “such seemingly diverse topics as one-to-one teaching, home study, individualized instruction, self-access facilities, self-directed learning, and autonomy, because they all focus on the learner as an individual” (Geddes and Sturtridge 1982). It also encompasses a learner-centred approach to language and takes special note of ethnolinguistic aspects of language learning, in which the autonomous role of the learner is coloured by their “second language self-image” and the teacher/learner roles prevalent in their sociolinguistic sphere (Riley 1988). There are also certain underlying basic assumptions regarding learning when we talk of “individualization.” According to Logan (1980):
People learn – even the same material – in different ways (this implies accepting different learning styles).

People can learn from a variety of sources, even if the final goals are the same – implying that the instructional materials can vary.

Direct teaching by a teacher is not essential for learning; it is only one of many possible experiences – which means that a teacher can be a facilitator instead of a preacher.

A variety of learning activities can take place simultaneously – referring to integrative language-learning activities.

People may have a variety of goals or objectives for learning a second language – implying that learners learn for different reasons.

Another perspective is added by Altman (1980), who clearly talks of three basic tenets that characterize individualized language teaching:

• a syllabus that meets the needs, abilities, and interests of each learner
• personalized goals, means, and expectations for learners
• teaching methods tailored to the needs of the learners

Logan’s assumptions and Altman’s tenets were examined for my research in general, and for the self-learning programme in particular, to determine how the concept of individualization could be exploited for large classes, where learners needed (a) exposure to language learning, (b) activities for confidence building, and (c) a learner-centred approach to build rapport between the teacher and the learners. Obviously, a tailor-made syllabus and teaching methodology for each learner was out of the question for my large classes of 100+. All the same, the learners were still considered to be the focal point of the learning programme, with realistic appraisal that they would all follow their own pace of learning and reach achievement levels congruent with the goals they set for themselves. It was also accepted that if Logan’s five assumptions were applicable in small classes, they could very well be applied to large classes, so long as the learning programme offered the learners a variety of optional activities.

The four Rs of individualization

The working definition that emerged from these deliberations was the acceptance of Altman’s “Three Rs of Individualization: Reeducation, Responsibility, and Relevance” (Williams and Williams 1979) – but with the addition of one more R, signifying Rapport, which can be taken for granted in one-to-one instruction or in a small class. This rapport is difficult, though just as (if not more) essential, to achieve in a large class. In the context of my research, the meaning of these four Rs of individualization are as follows.

Reeducation

This means reconstructing the role of the teacher as facilitator and the learner as the active agent in the process of learning. In the Pakistani context, this change needs to be emphasized all the more, since the teacher and the taught are both used to the lecture pattern of teaching in which the student is a passive learner as the teacher “talks” without any interaction or break for the whole teaching period.
Responsibility

This implies that learners take charge of their own learning. For the Pakistani learner this is a conceptual leap as they are used to rote learning and lack confidence in their own cognitive capabilities. It also implies the teacher’s responsibility to set up clearly stated tasks that can be monitored by learners on their own and ensure the availability of self-learning materials for learners.

Relevance

As most of the glossy and readily available material is devised for the nonnative learner studying EFL in the West, we need materials relevant to our learners. Also, relevance means finding contexts of learning that are meaningful for our learners.

Rapport

A class of 100+ is a class-management challenge for any teacher. It is only through the proper rapport that an atmosphere conducive to learning can be built up. Also, “humanizing” a large class is perhaps the only way to motivate learning.

The research programme

I devised a 50-hour remedial English course that focused on reading comprehension and writing skills. It was a voluntary, non-credit course, taught for two hours three times a week, and lasting approximately eight and a half weeks. The learners (104 volunteers, who were selected on a first-come, first-served basis) agreed to stay after their regular classes for this course. They were young female adults between 16 and 20 years of age, the majority coming from a middle-class background. These students were false beginners of English, having studied it for approximately seven years. They had little or no exposure to English in their day-to-day lives except for studying it as a “subject” in the Faculty of Humanities.

While discussing the learners’ expectations for the programme on the first day, it was mutually agreed that since 50 hours of class work would not be sufficient for any tangible improvement, the learners would supplement their work by following a self-monitored learning programme that included listening, reading, and writing skills. Learners were given a three-part questionnaire before and at the end of the project to evaluate their progress. The questionnaire was devised to find out (1) the learners’ background, (2) their attitude towards learning English, and (3) their proficiency level in English, through a reading-comprehension check and paragraph writing.

The response — performance as well as feedback from the project group — was very encouraging. For the purposes of this article, however, I shall only focus on the steps used for putting the concept of individualization into practice. The four Rs were taken as a reference point in a two-pronged thrust: (a) individualization in large classes, and (b) individualizing learning tasks (see Figure 11.1).

Individualization in the classroom

This section deals with the last R of individualization: rapport. It focuses on activities that “humanized” this large class for me by helping me familiarize myself with the learners as persons. It also helped to a great extent in class management.
Voluntary learning

The 104 students who enrolled for the language project (LP) did so voluntarily. They were told that the aim of the programme was fluency rather than accuracy, and that they would be taught skills rather than prescribed textbooks. They were under no pressure to join the course – especially as it was a non-credit “unofficial” course, carried out as part of a research project. In the following years I have used the concept of voluntary learning by consulting the students at the beginning of each academic year before setting up the year’s teaching programme for compulsory classes.

Background questionnaire

Learners were given an hour-long questionnaire on their first day in class. Learning about their background, attitudes, and perceived needs, as well as their proficiency level, helped me a great deal in understanding my learners. It also clarified their course expectations. The responses gave me information about the socioeconomic and ethnolinguistic community of the learners, which proved useful in organizing their group activities and outside class projects.

Grouping

On the very first day, after introducing the course, I asked the learners to form groups of three or four with their friends. As a number of activities were to use up time outside the class, we figured that it would be easier for learners to do their group tasks together in their free time in friendly groups. Forming their own groups also gave the learners more responsibility in sharing the class-management issues. Groups of four were then given a number to identify their group. They were also asked to sit together in class so they could share their group activities. Instead of moving around, we had permanent groups with a permanent seating arrangement.

Name tags

On the second day learners were requested to make name tags for themselves by writing their name and group number with a thick marker on a card measuring 3" × 4". They were to wear them as part of the class uniform throughout the duration of the course. This put a name to a face, which is otherwise impossible in a class of 104! It also made it easier for me to address everyone by their first names during activities and discussions. The magic of the first name also brought a more congenial atmosphere to the classroom, as classmates became more familiar with each other. There was definitely a better rapport between various groups as well as with me.

Profile cards

Creating profile cards proved to be a very interesting way to get to know the learners better. First, the points that were considered worth knowing about anyone were elicited in a brainstorming session and put on the blackboard. Secondly, these points were categorized and put in an order acceptable to everyone. Then students were asked to prepare their own profile cards, complete with their photograph and the details listed on the blackboard. It was announced that three prizes would be given to profile cards with good handwriting, correct spelling, and a neat, attractive presentation.
I learnt a lot about my learners' aspirations, strong points, and weak points, and having their photographs on the profile cards certainly helped me familiarize myself with their faces. The students enjoyed making these cards, too. Another advantage of having their names and addresses on their profile card was that I was able to reach my learners by mail after a sudden closing of all educational institutions (a frequent happening here!) and send them guidance on how to continue working on their own.

Lending library

As the majority of the LP learners did not have access to English books, magazines, and newspapers, I gathered from my friends and brought to the class used, simple story books, glossy magazines, and the magazine section of daily newspapers. Two or three of these were distributed to each group, who were to be (a) responsible for rotating and exchanging them with different groups, and (b) returning them to me at the end of the course. My purpose was simply to provide materials for extensive reading. I did not check to see if all the students used these, but they were film, fashion, and sports magazines, generally liked by teenage groups. I saw a brisk exchange before and after the class, so I presume a number of students did use these books and magazines. The responsibility of keeping track of these magazines gave the learners a sense of importance.

Individualizing learning tasks

I will discuss here self-learning programmes (SLP) aimed at improving students' language output as well as encouraging them to become independent learners. Training learners to monitor their own learning is as important in a large class as it is in a small one – in fact, more important, because in a small class, work can be supervised by the teacher, but in a large class this is virtually impossible. Hence, the best chance that a learner in a large class has is to take responsibility for his own learning. For the SLP, all the three Rs of individualization mentioned by Altman were considered. Students were given guidelines to (a) monitor their own scoring, (b) do peer correction, and (c) work independently on group projects. As a

![Diagram: Individualization in large classes]

*Figure 11.1 Individualization in large classes*
teacher in SLP I devised materials/activities and prepared guidelines for the tasks. Except for an occasional consultation, I was not involved in the SLP after initiating it.

Most of the activities mentioned are familiar to language teachers and are used extensively in EFL classes in one form or another. Therefore, I have picked out only a few to show how they were adapted to become learner-centred for SLP.

**Radio news**

Students were given a sample worksheet with instructions for listening to the local radio news and filling in a grid (see Figure 11.2). This was an activity that provided exposure to real-world listening for the learners. It also helped them improve their general knowledge. Moreover, the learners could work at a time convenient to them and at their own pace, without peer and classroom pressure. Thirdly, it was a self-monitored learning task in which they were able to gauge their own progress. Beginning to listen “better” also improved their self-confidence. They were able to follow and take notes from speeches of native as well as nonnative speakers at a later stage of the language project.

- Please use your radio cassette player and keep a separate cassette for this exercise.
- Try to do this exercise once a day.

**Aim:** This exercise will improve your listening skills. It will also improve your note-taking skills.

**Step 1**

Make the following grid in your ELP workbook.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Doer/person</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yesterday</td>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
<td>Inaugurated conference</td>
<td>Karachi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step 2**

Listen to the radio news at a time convenient to you.
Tape only the headlines while listening to it.
Fill in the grid as you listen to the news. See example above.

**Step 3**

Put your workbook face down.
Play back the recorded news.
Fill in the portions you missed in the first listening.
Play back the recorded news again.
Check your responses and complete the grid as you play the recorded news.
Look at a newspaper to check spellings/compare facts.

*Figure 11.2 Worksheet 1: radio news*

**Self-created cloze**

Students were given guidance to improve the “look” of their written work by being given (1) handouts to improve handwriting, (2) instructions to give special attention to indentation and writing format (e.g., margin, paragraph, etc.). As an exercise for this they were asked
to copy a paragraph a day from their prescribed textbooks, leaving out words, filling them in later, and then checking with the textbook again (see Figure 11.3).

- Please use your prescribed English textbook for the exercise.
- Try to write at least one paragraph every day.
- Use the attached handout as a model for your handwriting.

The aim of this exercise is to improve your
- Handwriting – Punctuation – Reading comprehension
- Grammar – Proofreading skills

**Step 1**
(Weeks 1 and 2)

a. Select a paragraph from your English textbook.
b. Mark or underline every 7th word.
c. Copy the passage in your best handwriting, leaving out the marked words. Draw a blank line instead.
d. Close the book. Take a break.
e. Fill in the blanks.

(Weeks 3 and 4)
Leave out every 6th word in Step 1a.

(Week 5 onwards)
Leave out every 5th word.

**Step 2**

Check your work:
- Have you put in a margin?
- Have you put in the date?
- Have you indented the paragraph?
- Does the writing look neat and tidy?

Open your textbook and check if you punctuated your work correctly.
Check your responses in the blanks.
Check the number of blanks and give yourself one mark for each correct answer.

*Figure 11.3 Worksheet 2: self-created cloze*

The usual practice is to give an unseen passage for cloze to teach/test comprehension or itemized grammar. But in the pilot testing of materials I discovered that my learners faced great difficulty if they were unfamiliar with the text. Copying from familiar texts made the exercise easier for them. The feedback confirms that a number of them improved in their scores with practice of this adapted version of cloze. They also became more confident when they attempted regular cloze exercises. Further, comparing their writing with the prescribed text, they got training in proofreading their own work, which highlighted their omissions and careless mistakes.
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Implications for teaching/learning in developing countries

My research started with the basic assumption that classes in countries like Pakistan are not likely to be reduced in size in the foreseeable future. Hence, solutions have to be realistic, within the limited constraints of the present teaching/learning situation. The acceptance of this reality can help a teacher to overcome the psychological barrier that the interactive approach/activities cannot be used in large classes. This assumption led me to seek out new ways of managing the class and individualized activities.

Acceptance of reality also led to setting up realistic, measurable, short-term achievable goals, which had a reinforcing effect on the teacher and learners. What and how much can a teacher/learner achieve, given the learning conditions that prevail in large classes? A teacher obviously cannot meticulously correct a hundred papers every day. In the same way, a learner cannot learn flawless English with limited exposure to the language. Therefore, the initial target was fluency rather than accuracy, providing learners with an occasion to “use” the language in real life.

[. . .]

The broad concept of individualization and the whole structure of the project demanded a drastic change in the teacher/learner roles. Again I started with the assumption that direct teaching or lecture is only one form of learning experience (Logan 1980), and that adult students are capable of taking their learning into their own hands. The transition from learner dependence to independence was not an easy process — especially in a system of education where spoon-feeding and rote learning are common teaching/learning strategies. But the skill-based approach demanding cognitive interplay was a challenge to a number of students. It moved them towards relying on their own judgements and conclusions, so that they became gradually independent. On the other hand, as a teacher, relegating learning tasks and responsibilities to students involved an element of risk and ensuing frustrations. For a teacher used to complete control of the class, this was initially not an easy task, but the students’ responses and enthusiasm lent a lot of support. In the last stages, their increased output and productivity became a reward in itself.

[. . .]

Conclusion

By incorporating individualization techniques my classroom research addressed three major ELT problems: large classes, the dependent learner, and lack of exposure to real-world English. Now what is needed most is its replication so as to evaluate the variables involved. Ideally, this replication should be done in Pakistan as well as in countries where similar teaching/learning conditions prevail. In contemplating such research, the following suggestions should be kept in view.

The basic materials and outline of the research done so far should be picked up, with adaptations and changes suitable for the age and level as well as the socio-ethnolinguistic background of the learners. The rationale behind the broad concept of individualization should be adopted as the basis of the approach used in handling large classes, and the focus of the research should be on activities and techniques that would be effective in large classes. Above all, more classroom-based research in large classes involving practicing teachers should be encouraged by institutions, organizations, and developers of syllabi and materials.

No doubt the picture of a large class of 100+ appears sad to those who have never had this experience, yet it is a condition faced by more than half the world’s population of teachers and learners. Hence it is of vital importance that action research involving large classes be given high priority. [. . .]
References


