



Comparing a large- and small-scale online language course: An examination of teacher and learner perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how class size affects the quality of online language teaching and learning. Administrators and departments often make decisions about class size based on fiscal and budgetary constraints rather than on best practices in blended and/or online learning. The present study compared the experiences of instructors and students in two second semester online Spanish language courses. There were 125 students enrolled in the large-scale class and 25 students enrolled in the small-scale class. Each class had one instructor and no teaching assistants. Two instruments were used to collect data, a Teacher Questionnaire and an anonymous Student Questionnaire. The results indicate that a large class size negatively impacts students' satisfaction with their online language learning experience. Further, in the large-scale course, the quality and quantity of student–student and student–instructor interaction was limited and instructor expertise was underutilized since the large class size affected the instructor's ability to create an environment conducive to learning.

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1. Introduction

The impetus for the present study came about while one of the authors was conducting another research study with online language learners. While realizing that investigation, she noticed dramatic disparities between the large-scale (cap of 125) and small-scale language courses (cap of 25). Both courses were offered at the same institution; the large-scale course was offered at the main campus where enrollment is approximately 39,000 undergraduate, graduate, and non-degree seeking students. The small-scale course was offered at a satellite campus located one hour south of the main campus, where enrollment is approximately 2000 undergraduate, graduate, and non-degree seeking students. Both courses were offered through the World Languages department, and the administrators in place on both campuses were free to make decisions about course caps for online enrollments independent of one another. At the main campus, where the large-scale course was offered, the revenue brought in from lower division Spanish language courses with high enrollment helps to offset the costs of offering upper division literature courses that attract few students. At the satellite campus, where the small-scale course was offered, only introductory-level Spanish and French classes are offered. Further, the leadership at the satellite campus claims that the 15:1 student/teacher ratio (on average) enables students to receive

personalized attention from faculty. Given the great discrepancy in online language course enrollment caps between the two campuses, the present research study was undertaken to explore how class-size and teacher workload affect the quality of online language teaching and learning.

2. Background

Each year, more than 5.6 million college students in the United States take at least one class online, and the annual growth rate for online enrollments is 21%; conversely, the overall growth rate for the higher education student population is only 2% per year (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The demand for online and blended/hybrid courses is increasing as many universities are shifting to Web-based delivery of instruction in response to increasing financial pressure. Three quarters of institutions report that the demand for online courses and programs has risen due to the economic downturn (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Perhaps owed to this rapid expansion of online language offerings, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) most recent position statement on class size (2010) recommended that language courses offered either in a traditional classroom or at a distance should be capped at 15 students, which is in alignment with the National Education Association and the ADFL (2009) recommendations for maximum class size. ACTFL's (2010) position statement on class size also states that additional support must be provided to teachers where larger class sizes exist in order to maintain pedagogical efficacy. Likewise, the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (2002) recommends that online foreign language classes are limited to no more than 20 students.

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Despite these recommendations, many colleges and universities are basing their decisions about class size upon research literature conducted in distinct areas of academic inquiry into distributed and online learning.

3. Review of the literature

The role of class size in learning milieux and its potential effects on docents and pupils alike have long been a source of intrigue for researchers, pedagogues, and school administrators (Glass & Smith, 1979; Morgan, 2000; Williams, Cook, Quinn, & Jensen, 1985). Numerous studies have been conducted examining the relationship between class size and a variety of variables; namely, student performance, efficacy of instruction, student perceptions of teaching quality, and student satisfaction with their courses. In like manner, the research conducted to date has explored multiple teaching contexts, including early elementary education, secondary education, community college classes, presentational university courses, asynchronous learning networks, and online courses offered by four-year institutions of higher education. Despite such a wealth of research, results have been mixed (Morgan), and many important contexts, such as university-level online language courses, remain enigmatically unexplored.

3.1. Class size in higher education

The results of research examining the effects of instruction on university-level classes offer no clear indication of what role this variable really plays in developing student perceptions, attitudes, and achievement in courses of varying sizes. Williams et al. (1985) reviewed the literature on class size and student achievement. Looking specifically at Glass and Smith's (1979) exhaustive meta-analysis, they noted that few of the studies conducted to that point had dealt specifically with tertiary-level courses. Moreover, few of the studies reviewed in the meta-analysis included classes with more than 40 students enrolled. Because of this, Williams et al. indicated that the results of class-size research conducted up to the time of their article's publication may have been of dubious value for understanding the impact of class size on student performance in college-level courses. They set out, therefore, to quantitatively examine secondary data obtained from the testing center of a large university.

The test scores archived in the testing center covered multiple academic disciplines, course sections, and course sizes, and class sizes ranged from 13 to 1006 students. Specifically, 24 distinct courses, spanning 305 class sections, provided the data analyzed in Williams et al. (1985). The researchers computed a standardized score based on the mean and standard deviation of exam scores from all students who took the same form of an exam at the testing center. They used multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between class size and standardized exam scores. Their analysis did not reveal any significant relationship between the two variables; and based on their results, the researchers asserted that increasing class size from 30 or 40 up to several hundred would not affect student achievement at the tertiary level. Williams et al. concluded that "class size may be much less important an influence on student achievement than some educators have thought" (p. 315). However, the researchers did not examine the characteristics of the testing center exams, which were from lower-level courses and may have only tested recall rather than higher order thinking skills. Thus, the findings of Williams et al. may not be applicable to upper-level college courses and to courses that require problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

Some studies (Fernández, Mateo, & Muñiz, 1998; McConnell & Sosin, 1984; Wachtel, 1998) offer a portrait of student and instructor attitudes and perceptions of large classes, as opposed to a picture of quantifiable performance (which was the goal of Williams et al.). Student satisfaction has bearing on matters ranging from the attainment of tenure (given the relative weight and importance of student course

evaluations) to institutional reputation and student retention. Therefore, studies that examine student and instructor perceptions are also important inclusions in the overall dialogue on class size in university education.

In Wachtel's (1998) review of research literature exploring students' evaluation of their college instructors, he indicated that instructors who perceive that larger classes inhibit their ability to teach a course as they would like to do so tend to receive lower evaluation scores in these classes. He also noted that previous research has led some to hypothesize that the relationship between class size and student ratings is curvilinear in nature; this is to say that ratings for larger and smaller classes do not appear to have a significant relationship, but such a relationship does exist when the section in question is a medium-sized class. Wachtel pointed out, however, that the reasons behind this hypothesized curvilinear relationship are unknown and may easily be explained by the popularity of high-quality pedagogues.

It is essential to note here that the hypothesis regarding curvilinearity and class size does not possess full acceptance, nor is it resonant with all research examining student perceptions, attitudes, and evaluations of large classes. McConnell and Sosin (1984), for example, found that student attitudes toward large classes were significantly negative. In an empirical study based on the survey responses of 961 students enrolled in business and economics courses at a large Midwestern University, McConnell and Sosin explored student perceptions of instructor performance and student satisfaction levels in large classes. The class sizes included in their study ranged from 140 to 239 students. The student participants "reported a lack of instructor–student interaction and indicated problems with motivation, incentive, and attention" (McConnell & Sosin, 1984, p. 190). These findings may be particularly relevant for courses that require a high level of student–teacher interaction.

Fernández et al. (1998) used regression analysis to explore the relationship between teaching quality (as indicated by student evaluations of their instructors) and class size. Data were collected from 2915 classes of varying sizes. The researchers found a weak, yet statistically significant negative relationship between the two variables. However, they indicated that the relationship did not appear to be a linear one, and the linearity or non-linearity of any relationship identified in research studies examining this phenomenon is likely due to the range of classes (variability) included in the study. Thus, it may be stated that the research on the relationships between class size in higher education and student performance, class size and student satisfaction, and class size and perceived teacher efficacy is inconclusive. As a consequence, class-size research in higher education lacks the definitive answers that academic program administrators, educators, and legislators have long sought. In the absence of concrete answers from research that has taken a macro-level look at university education, it makes sense to peer into this phenomenon at a discipline-specific level.

3.1.1. The effects of class size on online and distance learning environments

Studies on the relationship between class size, student–teacher interaction, and student perceptions have proliferated with the advent of Web-based learning. The studies listed below have been conducted in a myriad of disciplines, and the generalizability, or external validity, of their results is largely unknown. Although it may be reasonably surmised that some transferability exists from one academic context to the next; what follows is an attempt to give a snapshot of some of the numerous studies that generally and genuinely represent discipline-specific investigations that focus on the effect of class size in online and/or distance courses.

Research in college-level online courses has purported to reveal that class size does not seem to be related to the following: (a) student satisfaction with their courses or instructors (Burruss, Billings, Brownrigg, Skiba, & Connors, 2009; Jiang & Ting, 2000), (b) educational practices (Burruss et al., 2009; Heinrich, Milne, & Ramsay, 2007; Karakaya,

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