



Using High Level Upperclass Undergraduates as TAs in Large Lower Division EFL Classes

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to offer a feasible way to show that the problem of large EFL courses for lower division can be solved by the use of high level upperclass undergraduates as teaching assistants in and out of class. The use of UTAs fragments the large class into seemingly small classes with view to stimulating interest and effective learning outcomes in large classes. The paper discusses how to apply UTAs in large EFL classes from the aspects of selecting, training, and using UTAs. It also makes an objective appraisal of the use of UTAs in a large class.

Keywords: Undergraduate Teaching Assistant (UTA), Large English Class, Lower division

I. Introduction

Since the late 20th century, and early 21st century, with the increase of the enrollment and teaching cost, class size has been going up. Another commonplace phenomenon prevailing in the schools of higher education is the merge of two or more classes into one attending the same course due to the shortage of the course teacher. The number of the students after the merge of classes in attending certain lessons increases to 50—70, even over 100 in some non-English major English classes.

Professor Gu (2001) from Beijing Foreign Studies University holds the view that, if the number of a class exceeds 40 students, it can be classified into the large class. The world-famous English teaching expert Harmer(2000) also thinks that a class has over 30 or 50 students can be regarded as a large class.

The large English classes common on most college campuses pose a particular challenge to teachers, for language learning requires a more personal contact between the teacher and students and more opportunities for students to practice their acquired language skills. Lectures are generally described from the teacher's point of view, and the student's need for interaction with the teacher is not addressed. In fact, lack of interaction is considered one of the major limitations of the traditional lecture (Munson, 1992). The large, impersonal lecture format simply cannot accommodate the broad range of student differences, for the size of the course mitigates against personal attention to specific students needs (Friedlander and Kerns, 1998). Furthermore, when students have copies of the lecture notes or a text, a significant percentage would prefer reading them rather than attending classes that offer little or no interaction (Sullivan and McIntosh, 2002).

Consequently, the teachers find it hard to teach well in a large class with lack of effective communication between students and teachers, even the simplest teaching method of Ask and Answer cannot be carried out effectively, for most probably it involves only a couple of students. Generally the teaching mode of a large class tends to be a lecture with a teacher dominating the whole class, a lecture with neither response, nor interaction, nor discussion. Gradually, students come to lose interest in the subject, absent-minded, chatting, doing their own things, not to say falling asleep, which in turn discourages the teacher and results in the deterioration of the teaching effect. Scholars and teaching staff both at home and abroad have been exploring a more effective, scientific pedagogy to improve the teaching in a large class.

One of the most dramatic course innovations of a large class was the use of an organizational simulation or game. The major advantage of games and simulations was that students were active participants rather than passive observers (Mallor, et al., 1981). In colleges and universities, efforts are underway to transform the classroom from a lecture-based experience to a more active and demanding one for students (Matthews, Cooper, Davidson, and Hawkes, 1995). Web-based learning could meet individual needs, motivate students to find resources, and to publish with a creative mind. It also promoted cooperation and collaboration amongst faculty and students (Hanson and Jubeck, 1999). AUTC Project 2001 in Australia also reported (2002) web-based activities were described covering the full range of disciplines, to structure or enhance students' learning in large classes. Christopher (2003) also discussed how the web was used as an instructional tool in large classes to motivate students to find resources, conduct webquests, complete time certain email assignments, and engage in active in-class discussions.

Recently in China, the research on teaching mode of large classes has also been done. The following viewpoints are representative. In a large class, incentive mechanism and competitive mechanism could be applied in group discussion (Liu, 2001). A “communication-aimed and student-centered” new concept should be cherished and the “student-centered topic-based approach” implemented (Wang and Yu, 2003). The large-class College English teaching model should take the form of teaching with the network students-centered independent learning as its feature (Xiong, 2006). Wang (2006) in his essay on teaching Chinese-English translation in a large class stressed the combination of individual and group practice before class with intensive instruction by the teacher in class, with a view to the actual requirements of their future jobs. Based on constructivism theory, self-learning and collaborative learning were also widely carried out in large classes in China (Zheng and Zheng, 2008).

No doubt, these teaching methods mentioned above are effective to some extent, realizing the purpose of activating most students inside class or outside class, but they have a common weakness—lack of the monitoring and tutoring system, which inevitably would end up in failure, for there is only one single teacher in charge of a large class who is unable to be responsive to each student in the process of studying under the instruction of these pedagogies.

The prevailing opinion is that attributed to Phil Wankat: “anything you can do in a large class you can do better in a small one” (Felder, 1997). However, we cannot change the class size. What measures can we take to perfect teaching in a large English class? The introduction of Upperclass UTAs (for convenience, in the following sections UTAs is used to refer to Upperclass undergraduate teaching assistants) may be a feasible solution to this problem. In this essay, UTAs are the focus of the whole teaching program rather than GTAs (graduate teaching assistants), for UTAs are more practical in implementation in average schools of higher education in China where English major graduates are probably unavailable.

Why is UTA applied in lower division English class? For lower division students are lacking in learning experience and skills at college, and they can learn a lot from UTAs in order to adapt themselves to college study within a short period of time. Besides, UTAs are only in a position to assist the lower division students.

Fragmented by UTAs, a large class practically turns into small classes or small seminars. This pedagogy can energize students in the courses, especially introductory courses (either English or Chinese) common on campuses, through the innovative use of UTAs, making students more active and engaged learners, and giving students in large classes a greater sense of belonging by creating a community of learners. The detailed operation will be illustrated in the following sections.

2. Using UTA in big classes

It is a common practice that TA (teaching assistant) is widely used not only in colleges, universities but also in high schools or primary schools in such well-developed countries as the U.K. and the U.S., where there are TA training centers or programs for TAs. TA has become a professional occupation on the market.

TA is not a prevailing practice in China. There are only a small portion of graduate students who work as TAs in college schools and assist undergraduate classes. However, in the average college schools, most of them are not entitled to enroll English-major graduates. In China, it is more practical to use high-level undergraduates of English specialty to solve the problems of large English classes.

2.1 Selecting UTAs

What students are qualified for TAs or what are eligibility requirements on UTAs? Prerequisite is that they have taken the course which they are going to assist, often given by the same professor or lecturer. Generally, an undergraduate who has done well in this course in a previous semester can serve as an excellent resource for other students.

Secondly, they are good at communication and expression. They must be able to communicate effectively with students and teachers. Thirdly, their own academic study must be guaranteed, for they are studying their own undergraduate courses in order to gain enough credit points for graduation. Finally, they must demonstrate initiative and a willingness to follow a teacher’s directions.

Take the course of Survey of English-speaking Countries for example. Undergraduates usually take this course in the second academic year. Typically this course is given by way of large lectures, that is, two or more classes attend the lecture at one time. (It is the same case with other introductory courses including linguistics, American and British literature, Business English and the like.) Before this course is given, the course teacher should choose some UTA candidates from the former students who have already studied it and have done well in it, and arrange an interview for them together with some teaching peers to select three to five in accordance with the size of the class. Roughly, each TA is in charge of 10 to 15 students. During the interview, a scoring guide may be used to help the selection. The aim of the interview is to assess their communicative English ability, for UTAs’ main work is to help the course teacher to carry out the task-based teaching programs in the form of group discussion in large classes, so their communicative ability is essential in addition to their previous excellent testing results.

2.2 Training UTAs

After the UTAs are determined, teachers of the corresponding courses may give lessons to the UTAs, informing them of the requirements and detailed procedures of the courses. The training can be conducted as described.

A short course should be offered to UTAs either on weekends or a week right after the summer vacation begins. The training syllabus covers general topics of importance, including grading, recording, and leading discussions. The purpose is let the UTAs have a rough idea of what teaching is and how teaching program is planned and implemented, what role they will play in and out of class, what and how they should do in practice.

Then, teachers provide teaching strategies from the perspective of a particular course.

Last, a trial teaching should be simulated with aid of a class of students.

The training program helps high level undergraduate students well prepared for the role of TA in a certain course in the coming semester.

Besides, all the UTAs profiles should be kept by the Student Affairs Department for supervising the job they are doing and also ensuring that they are not overtaxed with teaching responsibilities.

2.3 Applying UTAs in a Large Class

In a large class of 60 students, the number of UTAs is supposed to 3—4. In this way, the class can be divided into 4 groups with 15 students each. In other words, the large class is turned into 4 seminars, each with one UTA.

Serving as true assistants to a large class, UTAs usually perform all or part of the following duties:

- (a) Provide individual or small group tutoring.
- (b) Monitor and/or provide feedback on the academic progress of assigned students.
- (c) Assist in the development of general study skills as well as those related to the specific area of study.
- (d) Offer academic strategies for meeting special learning needs of select students.
- (e) Help the teacher maintain classroom discipline.
- (f) Grade homework assignments and examinations.

The following steps are the detailed procedures of applying UTAs in a large class of Survey of English-speaking Countries with the lecture entitled American Two Party System and General Election. The large class was divided into groups of 15 students on the basis of the dorm. One dorm had 4-5 on the average. The adjacent dorms made up a group, which provided convenience both to the UTA and the gathering of the students for out-of-class discussion.

Pre-class discussion. A week before the lecture, the teacher assigned a discussion topic “Why could Barack Obama defeat John McCain in the 2008 general election?” With this assignment, the students would hunt for relevant information by all means. During this period the UTAs should participate in the preparation for the topic, providing individual or group tutoring concerning how to search, select and summarize the related materials in accordance with the instructions of the teacher and former experience they had when they studied this course. At the same time, they kept track of the students’ preparation and provided the teacher with feedback on the fulfillment of the assignment. The UTAs’ record of the students’ performance could be used for the final grading of the students’ study.

Class presentation. This stage took up 20 minutes or so including 5 minutes for commentation. In class, before the teacher gave the lecture, the speaker(s) of one or two groups presented their achievement in the form of PPT or spoken English. Based on the presentation, the other groups made supplementary remarks on this topic with a UTA in charge of each group, for students usually do not take active part or just keep silent in the group discussion under the monitor of their peers. At that time, UTAs played the role of a teacher, guiding the commentation on the presentation and asking one of the students to jot down every group member’s viewpoints. In this way, all the students were energized and involved in the activity, which to some extent eliminated the passiveness of some students. Then UTAs or the speakers of each group spoke out the additional information or different viewpoints. Thus the whole class shared the full information offered by their peers. The teacher might ask UTAs to make comments on the performance of each group, enabling students to be more aware of the procedure of assignment fulfillment and improving their study next time. Finally, the teacher summed up the class presentation and evaluated each group’s performance.

Lecture. This stage also took up 15 minutes or so. Traditionally, in a large class “cramming” or “force-feeding” method of teaching is inevitably used. They fail to give more students the opportunity to answer questions or express their viewpoints on a certain subject, which unavoidably puts students in a passive position, encourages poor work habits and leads to the evaluation system to be more based on the students’ marks or results.

By using UTAs, the “cramming” time can be greatly reduced in a large class. Take the trial practice of using UTAs in the above-mentioned course for example. After presentation and commentation, the teacher spent 15 minutes making a

general introduction of the chapter, say, American Two Party System and General Election, of ideologies and traditions of the two major political parties and electoral system in the U.S. Then each group began to discuss and explained to the class one of the following questions designed by the teacher on US two-party dominance:

Why does America still have a Two-party system?

What's the effect of the electoral system?

What's the respective ideology of democrats/republicans?

Is the 'one party' system idea feasible?

During the PPT- aided lecture, the UTAs could review the materials given by the teacher and solidify their thoughts in order to help students in later discussion.

Group Discussion. This stage took up 10 minutes or so. Now it was time for UTAs to play the key role in class. As described above, a class of 60 students needed 3-4 UTAs. In the case of 3, the teacher should be in charge of one of the groups. If 4, the teacher could have the chance to move around monitoring all group activities.

Each group was subdivided into 3 small groups. The UTA monitored, guided and instructed each subgroup. For example, a group with the second topic could ask the UTA more about the electoral system if they still did not understand the electoral system. If the UTA failed to explain, he or she could turn to the teacher. More practically, the UTA with their grasped knowledge might help the students tackle the problems of expressing themselves in English, for the students were probably lacking in relevant technical terms. The UTA helped the group sum up the viewpoints of all the subgroups at the end of the group discussion. In the process of the discussion, the teacher played the role of monitoring the whole large class and gave necessary help to any group and also managed or controlled the time. After about 10 minutes' discussion, each group recommended a speaker (all the group members took turns to be a speaker.) In accordance with the order of the questions, each speaker took their turn to present the view of their group. Each presentation was followed by two or three commentators and further explanation and evaluation from the teacher. The presentation of this stage was carried out in the second period of the class. In this case, the students could make use of the break time to prepare for it.

In the form of presentation and prompt commentation, the teacher fulfils the teaching schedule and succeeds in activating all the students with the aid of UTAs.

Evaluation. The teacher evaluated the students' performance as a speaker in class from the four aspects: sentence organization, language fluency, idea clarity and logic solidity. Each item accounted for 25 points. Together with the detailed reports from UTAs on the students' preparation for the assigned subject outside class, the teacher gave each student a relatively fair evaluation of their daily learning performance. Since the teaching stressed the process not the final exam results, the grading of the process – information collection, discussion, presentation and commentation was put on priority, which took up at least half of the total score.

2.4 The Reward of UTAs

Unlike professors and GTAs, UTAs generally do not have a fixed salary but instead they can be paid by the hour, earn credit hours, or volunteer their time. No doubt, the rewarding system should be approved by the school authority.

3. Self-appraisal of the effect of using UTAs

3.1 The Integration of Many Learning Methods

Just as Heterick and Twigg point out redesigns which create more active learning environments can lead to real gains in learning (1999). The use of UTAs integrates many learning methods such as active learning, collaborative learning, cooperative learning, problem-based learning-- make large classes more engaging and interesting for both student and teacher. The interactive process allows students to reflect on their learning experiences, facilitating a higher order of learning. The interactive process promotes good communication abilities and effective interpersonal skills, while introducing and/or enhancing their research skills. The students attend class; they are more accountable to their course of study, their peers, and their assignments.

3.2 Advantages of Virtual Small Classes

As is known to the teaching professionals, small class sizes are to have many advantages over large ones. Much more individual attention can be given to each student. This is the crux of the matter, and illustrates why private tutoring is so sought after. The seemingly small classes also possess the advantages of the real small classes.

a. Aided by UTAs, the teacher is well informed of needs and interests of the students, making them more interested in the lessons, and thus more willing to learn.

b. Monitored and helped by UTAs, any student having difficulty with a particular lesson is less likely to fall through the cracks.

c. Working as missionaries or representatives of the teacher, UTAs foster better student/teacher relations. UTAs are sure to get well acquainted with all the students of their respective groups quickly. With UTAs' frequent contact with their groups and regular reports on each group member's study and interest, the teacher seems to be accessible and responsive. Such a relationship makes it much more likely for a student to seek help from the teacher, when needed.

d. More in depth assignments can be given. A teacher teaching a class of 100 rather than 15 or 20 is unlikely to assign more than one comprehensive paper (and rarely even that), is much more likely to rely on multiple choice exams rather than essays, and cannot give nearly as much feedback to each student. When people learn deeply, they construct their own understanding of what something means, how it might be applied, what its implications are, and so forth. Outstanding teachers help students construct, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate meaning. They do not just try to pour information in students' ears (Johnson et al., 1998). With the assistance of UTAs, the chance of for an average teacher to become an outstanding one is not always slim.

f. Smaller groups encourage participation more than large ones. Large classes rarely have any discussion whatsoever, and when they do it is very easy for students not to be involved. The quieter students or those who are less prepared can easily 'hide' behind the more vocal or better prepared students. In a small class one cannot hide and hope to be overlooked. Participation is often mandatory.

g. It is easier to get students to speak up in discussions in front of smaller groups than larger ones. Moreover, with the guidance and help of UTAs, students are more likely to feel at ease when expressing their own viewpoints.

h. More pressure to attend class, as one's absence would not go unnoticed, for each virtual small class is under the charge of a UTA.

On the other hand, the virtual small classes also have the advantages of a large class, which is beneficial to the students in the class. According to Andrew Schlafly (2008), large classes are better for the following reasons such as students can learn from more ideas and insights; students can acquire better experience at speaking in front of large groups with more students.

3.3 The Benefit of Working as a UTA

Working as a part-time UTA may bring about many benefits. The greatest benefit may be the experience of transitions between student life and professional world

UTAs as students, they are aware of their own positions where they are supposed to help students, and never make themselves difficult to approach. They serve as a moderator between students and teachers. In this way, they can learn how to get along well with both students and teachers, which is beneficial to their management of interpersonal relationships. And as teaching assistants, they can learn more from their teachers about the whole teaching procedure. They learn to provide instructional and clerical support for classroom teachers, assist junior students in learning class material using the teacher's lecture plans, providing students with individualized attention. The experience of working as paraeducators or paraprofessionals will be instructive to their future work, especially to those UTAs who will take education as their future career. In a word, being a UTA may result in favorable job prospects.

4. Suggestions on maintaining relationships with UTAs

Maintaining a good relationship with UTAs is the guarantee of successful accomplishment of teaching procedures in a large class. Suggestions are given in the form of second person for convenience.

a. You (the teacher of a large English class) should make your expectations clear at the beginning of the semester. Getting off to a good start is critical. The following kinds of questions should be taken into consideration: What are the course objectives, and how do you intend to work with TAs to fulfill these objectives? More specific issues to address might include: What kinds of student questions and situations do you want to handle yourself, and what kinds would you like the TA to handle (or at least have a first try)? Do you expect TAs to regularly attend lectures in the classes they assist?

b. Maintain close contact with UTAs throughout the semester. Consider meeting formally with them at regular intervals-- meetings before giving major exams, collecting big assignments, or introducing difficult concepts. Here are some questions that you may need to discuss with UTAs as the semester progresses. What are the ground rules for responding to student work? What criteria will be used for evaluating specific assignments?

c. Facilitate the flow of feedback. Provide a forum to encourage UTAs to keep you informed of what students already know and what they are having difficulty understanding. Similarly, provide UTAs with regular feedback on the work they are doing.

d. Help UTAs balance their work for you with their own study. Ask them to keep track of their hours and to let you know when the workload exceeds expectations. You may need to make slight adjustments in what you're asking of UTAs.

- e. Sit in on at least one of each UTA's discussion group during the course of the semester. (You will get feedback on students' learning as well as provide guidance to your UTAs on their instruction.)
- f. Share your experience: give UTAs tips on how to get students actively involved in a discussion or problem-solving session.

Absolutely, there are many alternative ways to maintain a good relationship with UTAs in response to the practical situation. But above all, the teacher should value the work UTAs are doing and keep close contact with them in order to assign them tasks and give necessary instructions.

5. Conclusion

Thanks to the involvement of UTAs, the students indicated positive reactions to group discussions and class presentations. This UTA-aided pedagogy proved to be highly effective in increasing interaction among students. It makes a large English class possess the advantages of a small class, guaranteeing most of the lower division students' active participation in class. UTAs' knowledge of the course, familiarity with the institution, and proximity to their peers allow them to play an important and unique role both in and out of the classroom. They guide students' discussions and presentations, record students' learning procedures and their performance, grade their short assignments, provide the teacher with the most credible feedback from the students and help the teacher improve the teaching effect. In a word, using UTAs in a large class is not only beneficial to the students, but the course teacher and UTAs themselves as well. This pedagogy can also be applied to serve other courses. However, the implement of it cannot detach from the support of school authority, for many concerned matters have to be approved by it like credit earning and class arrangements to warrant UTAs' normal study and their benefit.

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