

# Applying Cooperative Development in Exploring College English Teaching in a Large Class Format in China<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Given the fact that the large class phenomenon cannot easily be eliminated, it is important for teachers to develop effective strategies to teach English in large classes. The purpose of this study was to understand in what ways post-observation discussions lead to increased self-awareness of a college English teacher concerning pedagogy with special reference to large class teaching. Data were collected from document analysis, observations, and discussions. The post-observation discussions were structured using the theoretical frameworks of the Cooperative Development model and the Collaborative Conversation Approach. Data analysis generated four themes: Student participation, affective factors, classroom management, and instructional strategies. This study provided insights which might be useful to teachers who teach large classes in China and around the world. It also provided implications and recommendations for further research.

## Resumen

Teniendo en cuenta el hecho de que el fenómeno de la clase grande no puede ser eliminado dentro de un período razonable de tiempo, es aún más importante para los profesores desarrollar estrategias de enseñanza efectivas para enfrentar este fenómeno. El propósito de este estudio fue comprender de qué manera las discusiones de post-observación conducen a una mayor autoconciencia de un profesor de inglés universitario de su pedagogía con especial referencia a la enseñanza en clases grandes. Los datos de este estudio se recopilaron mediante análisis de documentos, observación en el aula y discusión tras observación. Y las discusiones de post-observación se estructuraron utilizando los marcos teóricos del "modelo de desarrollo cooperativo" (Cooperative Development Model) y un enfoque de "conversación colaborativa" (Collaborative Conversation Approach). El análisis de los datos generó cuatro temas: participación estudiantil, factores afectivos, manejo del aula y estrategias de instrucción. Este estudio proporcionó ideas que pueden ser útiles para los profesores que enseñan las clases grandes en China y en todo el mundo. También proporcionó las implicaciones de los hallazgos y recomendaciones para las futuras investigaciones.

## Introduction

Sizeable classes, a growing phenomenon in developing countries, is closely related to two causes: Initiatives to achieve universal education and rapid population growth (Bendow et al., 2007; Shehu & Tafida, 2016). A series of measures has been taken by many countries (Brazil, China, Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Mexico, and Nigeria) to offer educational access to more citizens, especially school-age children (Shehu & Tafida, 2016). Global initiatives to achieve universal education were guided by two phrased goals: *The 1990 World Conference on Education for All* in Jomtien, Thailand, set up the goal of achieving education for every person in the world and emphasized education as an essential approach in fighting disease and poverty (Shehu & Tafida, 2016). *The 2000 World Education Forum* in Dakar, Senegal, and the more recent *United Nations Millennium Development Goals* aimed to achieve universal primary education by the year 2015 (Bendow et al., 2007; Shehu & Tafida, 2016). While the goal to achieve universal primary education still needs more effort and a longer timeline, the initiatives from governments in developing countries to achieve those goals have led to substantial student enrollment growth in primary education. Those initiatives have caused subsequent growth for higher education student enrollment in developing countries (Shehu & Tafida, 2016).

Meanwhile, rapid population growth impacted the increase in class size. The world population doubled from 3 billion to 6 billion during the period 1959-1999, with the expectation of reaching 9 billion by the end of 2044 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Rapid population growth in the world, especially in developing countries, influenced a country's demographics, and this led to young people becoming the largest percentages of the population in many countries, including many school-age children or teenagers (Bendow et al., 2007). In order to meet the demands of the growing number of school-age students, governments have given priority to educational access and initiated measures to reduce or eliminate school costs to increase students' enrollment (Bendow et al., 2007). For example, in 1986, the Chinese government promulgated the *Compulsory Education Law of the China*. After that, the primary school enrollment rate in China experienced significant growth from 25 percent in the year 1949 to over 99 percent since the year 2005 (Li, 2011). Those measures, however, affected funding for public education. Funding became limited with reduced school costs, and teachers became overwhelmed by the increased number of students in their classes (Shehu & Tafida, 2016). According to the 2018 statistics in China,

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1 This is a refereed article. Received: 3 February, 2020. Accepted: 6 May, 2020.

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there were 178,700 classes in primary schools and 86,300 classes in middle schools with more than 66 students per classroom, which accounted for 6.49% and 8.62% of all the classes in the country respectively (Chu, 2019). Meanwhile, there were infrastructure issues such as lack of qualified teachers, limited classroom space, and inadequate teaching materials, all of which affected the quality of student learning (Shehu & Tafida, 2016).

The definitions of a large class format can be categorized both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative definitions of a large class vary based on different researchers and contexts (LoCastro, 2001; Shehu & Tafida, 2016; Xu, 2001). In many Western countries such as the U.S., a class size of 30 students could be considered large and would need to be adjusted or reduced (Bendow et al., 2007). In contrast, in developing countries, such as China or Nigeria, a class with 50 to 100 students would seem common (Shehu & Tafida, 2016). Language classrooms in developing countries sometimes have 150 to 300 learners or more (LoCastro, 2001). According to Hayes (1997), no single quantitative definition exists for a large class, as the standards of a large class varied in different contexts. Bendow et al. (2007) mentioned that overcrowded or large classrooms are defined as situations where the proportion of students to teacher is over 40:1. In Xu's (2001) article, a large class referred to the number of students ranging from 60 to 150. LoCastro (2001) concluded that the criteria for a large class greatly depends on the classroom teacher's experience and perspectives. Devi (2016) supported this claim by arguing that a large class is a relative term, and what determines a large class is not the number of students in the class, but the teacher's view of class size in his or her own context. For the purpose of this study, the following qualitative definition was used: A large class is one where the available resources cannot support the number of students in the classroom (Ur, 1996), or the number of students is out of the teacher's preference or ability to manage (LoCastro, 2001).

## Literature Review

### Teaching College English in China

In order to meet the growing demands for English proficient talents, College English has been required as a specific course of English in Chinese universities and colleges for non-English major undergraduate students since the early 1980s (Chen & Goh, 2011; Gao, 2013; Li, 2009; Ruan & Jacob, 2009; Xu, 2001; Yan & Ding, 2013). The course is divided into a listening and speaking class (also called College English Visual-Audio-Oral course), and a reading and writing class (Ruan & Jacob, 2009; Yan & Ding, 2013). The former is usually offered in an audio lab and the latter is held in a regular classroom (Ruan & Jacob, 2009). The national syllabus of College English was established in the early 1980s and divided into six levels ranging from Band One to Band Six (Gao, 2013; Li, 2009; Ruan & Jacob, 2009). The section comprising Bands One to Band Four is required for non-English major students, while Bands Five to Six are optional (Li, 2009). In order to evaluate college students' completion of the goals of the national curriculum, the College English Test (CET) was launched in 1987. It includes CET Band Four (CET-4) and CET Band Six (CET-6) (Li, 2009). The CET in China is a high-stakes standardized test to assess college students' English abilities (Li, 2009).

The challenges of College English instruction includes contextual constraints, teacher factors, and student factors (Chen & Goh, 2011). Studies have identified contextual constraints as limitations in influencing teaching College English in China, such as large class sizes, teachers' lack of instruction time, inadequate teaching resources, as well as a lack of effective and efficient assessment tools (Chen & Goh, 2011; Lamie, 2006). The large class sizes made it difficult for English teachers to implement communicative language learning activities in the limited classroom space (Lu & Ares, 2015; Yu, 2001). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an approach to teaching language that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the purpose of learning a language (Daisy, 2012). A variety of activities for the CLT approach included role play, interviews, information gap activities, pair work, and so on (Daisy, 2012). Nevertheless, many researchers have shown that the CLT approach has adaptation problems in Chinese classrooms (Lu & Ares, 2015; Sun & Cheng, 2002; Yu, 2001). Yu (2001) analyzed CLT in China and found that classrooms with 60 students were too crowded for learner-centered teaching.

Additionally, teachers were frustrated by their low self-efficacy in oral English proficiency and lack of pedagogical knowledge (Chen & Goh, 2011; Gao, 2013). Most College English teachers in China were English major graduates who receive little or no pre-service training on pedagogy, which often makes them feel unprepared for dealing with practical problems in teaching (Chen & Goh, 2011; Gao, 2013). This lack of pedagogical aspects made teachers frequently teach by recalling the traditional methods that their teachers used, i.e., teaching College English as the sole transmission of knowledge related to literacy rather than cultivating communicative competence (Gao, 2013).

Finally, Chen and Goh (2011) identified the students themselves as one source of difficulty which negatively influences College English teaching. A survey of 1,282 College English teachers in 289 colleges and universities in China showed that 42.8% of their students lack enthusiasm in learning English (Yan & Ding, 2013). Common problems existed for College English learning, such as students' lack of motivation for learning oral English, students' unwillingness to speak English, as well as difficulties concerning students' various English backgrounds and needs (Chen & Goh, 2011).

Research findings revealed that College English teachers reported needing effective teacher training in order to meet the current needs for qualified teachers in this new era (Chen & Goh, 2011; Gao, 2013; Lamie, 2006). The issue of teaching in large classes was rarely addressed or mentioned in pre-service training courses. Given the fact that the large class phenomenon cannot be eliminated in a reasonable time, it would seem that a crucial aspect of any training course is for teachers to exchange ideas and share their experiences in order to help solve the problem of teaching English in large classes (Hayes, 1997). Although teachers can learn from training, guest speakers, publications to solve problems in their classrooms, the sense of developing their own potential and looking deeper into their own context is a powerful practice in their professional development (Edge, 1992). Xu (2001) examined strategies for teaching College English in large classes in China. The author stressed the importance of sharing classroom management strategies with other teachers with similar experiences with in large class formats. Meanwhile, gaps exist concerning how to structure the trainings or professional development to cater to the teachers' needs and solve the practical problem of teaching College English in a large class format. Therefore, this study focused on understanding the experiences of a current College English instructor in a public four-year college in China. It intended to explore how post-observation discussions influence the instructor's awareness of her pedagogy, especially as it related to teaching in large classes. It generally provided insightful ideas for teachers who teach large classes across the globe.

#### Cooperative Development Model

The post-observation discussions were structured by using the theoretical framework of the Cooperative Development Model (CDM) and the Collaborative Conversation Approach (CCA). The CDM of professional development drew on the non-judgmental philosophy of Carl Rogers (1995, 2004), Rogers and Freiberg (1994) in psychotherapy, and on interpretations of this theory by Curran (1972, 1976, 1978). Then the CDM was brought into the TESOL field by Stevick (1976, 1980, 1990), and developed by educators and researchers such as Oprandy (1999). The CDM developed through several stages. The seminal work by Julian Edge (1992) in his book *Cooperative Development*, which first brought up the theory of CDM; the second stage involved Edge's ideas in *Continuing Cooperative Development* (2002), which was an extension of one-to-one CDM to Group Development (GD) and approaches to conducting CDM at a distance such as by email or cassette (Bartrick, 2002; Cowie, 2002). The third stage of CDM was developed into Edge's (2006) Computer-Mediated Cooperative Development (CMCD), which included Instant Messenger Cooperative Development (IMCD) by Boon (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013) and CD through emails, for example, EMCD (Cowie, 2002; Edge, 2006).

The Cooperative Development model encourages the work with one or more colleagues over a period of time and investment in collegial relationships to enhance teachers' capacity building (Edge & Attia, 2014). This process involves the collaboration of the understander(s) and the speaker to work together and follow specific rules for communication (Edge, 2006; Edge & Attia, 2014). The understander is someone who sets aside his or her own set of knowledge, experience, and opinions to better understand the speaker (Edge, 2006). The speaker is a person who brings up an issue he or she would like to work on and tries to push his or her thinking to a higher level of clarity, thanks to the empathetic listening of the understander (Boon, 2011; Edge & Attia, 2014).

Both the understander and the speaker follow the principles of respect, empathy, and sincerity in their style of communication (Edge, 2002). First, the understander accepts the speaker's decision on what to talk about or work on, and respects the speaker's opinions and ideas without judging them based on his/her own values (Edge, 2002; Edge, 2006). Second, the understander tries to empathize with the speaker through acceptance and imagination of seeing things through the speaker's perspective (Edge, 2002). To achieve a deeper level of understanding, he/she may ask for clarification and for sensitivity to the attitudinal and emotional tone during the conversation (Edge, 2002). Third, the understander needs to offer genuine respect and empathy to the speaker without pretending to understand or influence them (Edge, 2002; Edge, 2009). Based on the three principles, a series of moves are contained in the CDM process including attending, reflecting, thematizing, challenging, focusing, goal setting, and trialing (Edge, 2002). Below is a figure to show the seven steps of the CDM process (see Figure 1):

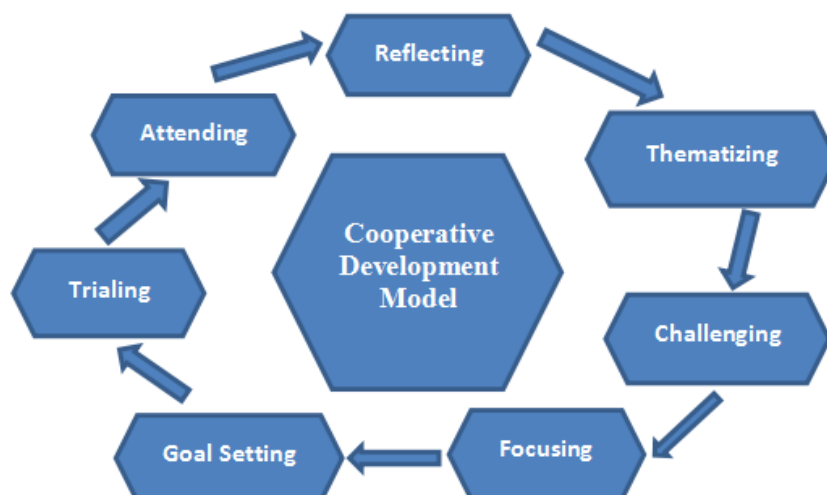


Figure 1. Cooperative Development Model (CDM). Adapted from Edge (2002, p. 44).

### Collaborative Conversation Approach

A Collaborative Conversation Approach is to work with classroom teachers in an exploratory, non-judgmental way to describe their pedagogy and teaching lives (R. Oprandy, personal communication, October 17, 2018). Arcario's research (1994) found post-observation discussions are typically dominated by a "canonical conversation" which consists of evaluation, justification and prescription of classroom teaching. The Collaborative Conversation Approach encourages teachers to be active listeners, to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and to provide empathetic understanding responses while having professional development conversations with other colleagues or mentors. This approach leads teachers to assume a believing stance rather than a doubting stance, avoid the self-defensive trap, and take responsibility for more cooperative endeavors (Oprandy, 1999; Oprandy et al., 2013). The benefit of the Collaborative Conversation Approach is reflected in Richardson's (1994) argument, "active collaboration leads to shared or mutual reconstruction that is agreed upon by both practitioner and researcher" (p.7). The results of collaboration are suggestive of new ways of looking at the practitioner's context and providing possibilities for changes in practice (Richardson, 1994). The collaborative conversations could happen among teachers who teach the same subject in their school, teachers who teach in the same grade, or teachers who have the same interest in specific topics or themes (Vincente, 2017).

Since the purpose of the CDM is to empower teachers through professional development based on understanding their own classroom context and practices (Stewart, 2003), the participant teacher's knowledge of many classroom experiences were a good fit for this study. Those experiences could serve as foundations for the metacognitive reflection during the post-observation discussions. Also, the participant teacher's experience was a typical example of a College English instructor in China in that the teacher graduated as an English major, which gave her little pre-service training in language pedagogy. Therefore, the participant teacher was supportive of this study. She was motivated to discuss issues that she wanted to talk about during the post-observation discussions to improve her teaching of College English in large classes. The desire for self-improvement was in accordance with the origin of Edge's Cooperative Development framework and sprang from the research of Rogers (2004), who believed that the essence of teacher development is self-development (Edge, 1992). The Cooperative Development model of professional development provided one possible way for College English teachers in China to deal with the challenge of teaching College English in a large class format.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to (a) understand how post-observation discussions lead to increased self-awareness of a College English teacher of her pedagogy, especially related to large class teaching, and (b) provide insights which might be useful to teachers who teach large classes in China or in other similar contexts.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following general research questions:

*In what ways do post-observation discussions lead to increased self-awareness of a College English teacher's pedagogy, particularly as it relates to her teaching of large classes, and what insights emerging from those discussions might be useful to Chinese teachers teaching large College English classes?*

The sub-research questions for this study were:

1. *In what ways does a large class format influence the teaching of College English courses?*
2. *What are some strategies revealed in the observations and post-observation discussions that may be useful for instructors teaching College English in large classes?*
3. *What findings from the post-observation discussions could be useful for teacher-trainers and mentors?*

## **Methodology**

This qualitative study employed a single instrumental case study to gain an in-depth understanding of a College English teacher's perspective of teaching English in a large class. Towards this end, a single instrumental case study was applied to explore the participant teacher's College English classes in Heishui College (pseudonym) from May, 2018 to July, 2018, as the case or bounded system of the study. The participant teacher, Mei (pseudonym), was the unit of analysis for the study. For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants and institutions in the present study.

### Data collection

The research site of the study was a public four-year college in northern China. The participant teacher, Mei, was recruited through convenience sampling. The researcher contacted a lecturer from the research site college, after introducing the purpose of the study and recruitment criteria for the participant. The lecturer suggested Mei as the participant for this study because of her rich experiences in teaching College English, and the fact that she taught College English in a large class format in the spring and fall semesters of 2018. The recruitment process started with sending her a recruitment letter in Chinese to inform her about the purpose of this study, methods, the researcher's contact information, and so on. After Mei's approval, an informed consent form that introduced the purpose of this study, risks and ways to avoid the risks, benefits of this study, voluntariness, and ways of protecting the confidentiality of the participant was provided to her. The researcher asked the participant teacher to help with signing the informed consent form at the beginning of the pre-observation discussion before officially starting the data collection process. Data were collected via document analysis, classroom observations, and discussions. The documents analyzed in this study included introduction of the research site from the official college website, course syllabi, lesson plans, course textbooks, and slides used in the participant teacher's English classes. The introduction of Heishui College on the official website was used as the document to provide information about the research venue.

The researcher observed all College English classes that the participant teacher taught, including the College English Reading and Writing (CERW) course and the College English Visual-Audio-Oral (CEVAO) course for three weeks from the end of May until the end of June. In each class, there were 110, 80 and 127 students respectively. Twenty-one observations, each lasting 100 minutes for a total of 35 hours, were conducted over a three-week period. Each class lasted for 50 minutes, and every observation included observing two classes consecutively. The other missing hours were due to students' fieldwork when they stopped every class and went out of school for fieldwork during one specific week. An observation protocol and field notes were used to record the observational data.

Four discussions (one pre-observation discussion and three post-observation), collectively lasting four hours, were conducted over five weeks. Another discussion of member checking which lasted for 30 minutes was conducted at the end of the study to avoid any misinterpretation of the information. The discussions were conducted in Chinese, and English was used if needed. In this study, the CDM was applied to guide the post-observation discussions between the participant teacher and the researcher. The participant teacher took the role as the speaker, and the researcher took the role as the understander initially during the conversation and switched roles at times in order to help answer the research questions. This study also applied a Collaborative Conversation Approach. The discussions were semi-structured with some research questions that the researcher needed to address with the participant teacher. Sample discussion questions were "Tell me about or describe this week's lessons" and "What strategies have you applied before which you find effective when teaching College English in large classes?"

### Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted according to the following four steps. First, the pre-observation discussion and three post-observation discussions were transcribed in Chinese. Through detailed reading of the documents, field notes and the transcripts, margin notes were taken to record ideas or key concepts that occurred to the researcher during this process (Creswell, 2013). The next step of coding involved aggregating the field notes and the transcripts into categories of information. The third step involved representing the data through in-depth descriptions and a large number of quotes from the

documents, field notes, and the transcripts of the post-observation discussions (Creswell, 2013). Finally, the researcher presented the initial findings to the participant teacher to get her views towards the findings. After getting Mei's feedback, the researcher made revisions accordingly in order to better answer the research questions and present the findings.

## Findings

From the data analysis, four themes were identified: Student participation, affective factors, classroom management, and instructional strategies.

### Student participation

First of all, the post-observation discussions led to the participant teacher's increased self-awareness in finding effective ways to encourage student participation in her large College English classes. In a classroom with over one hundred students, the participant teacher found it very difficult to let each student actively participate in the class. During the post-observation discussions, several possible ways to foster student participation in the teacher's large College English classes were identified which included group rewards, throwing a beach ball or plush bear, eliciting students' answers, and providing encouraging feedback to motivate students' participation.

Through applying the steps of thematizing, goal setting, and trialing in the Cooperative Development model (Edge, 2002), the researcher assisted the participant teacher in recalling the method of group rewards during the post-observation discussions and she applied it during the rest of the semester. Mei divided students into several groups and added participation points to each member in the group when one member correctly answered the questions. The group rewards had an important effect on students' participation, as many more students participated in the class than the previous week. Group rewards could benefit students' cooperation and sense of community to collaborate with each other in achieving a specific goal. Students in the large classes were encouraged by other group members to contribute to the team effort.

Based on personal experiences, the researcher shared with the participant teacher the idea of throwing of a beach ball or plush bear, which could be used to encourage students' participation in a large class format. This method could be used when students abstained from answering a question or when two or more students answered a question at the same time. For eliciting students' answers to encourage participation, the researcher observed the teacher's wait time and the way of eliciting student answers in her classes, then reported to her the observations based on the field notes and an observation protocol. Rowe (1986) defined wait time as the amount of time the teacher gives the student to respond after asking a question. Rowe's study showed that when the teacher leaves at least three seconds of wait time, significantly positive outcomes could happen. The sharing of wait time from Rowe's study with the participant teacher deepened her awareness of leaving at least three seconds of wait time for students to think over the answers before taking the next action. Through the class observations, the researcher shared with the teacher a description of how she elicited students' answers when the called-on student responded, "I don't know" or kept silent. The participant teacher managed to simplify, refine, paraphrase, or translate the question to make it more understandable to the students and provided students enough time to think over the question.

To encourage students' participation, the participant teacher provided non-critical feedback by repeating the students' answers to make it clearly heard by others, and then correct the mistakes by saying the answers in a correct way. The researcher provided suggestions to the teacher based on Borich's (2011) chapter on *Providing Feedback and Correctives in a Noncritical Atmosphere* that maybe she could add language variety when providing feedback, showing enthusiasm in tones or emotions while praising, or acknowledging the students' efforts in front of the class. In addition, the researcher introduced the concept of "positive reinforcement" which is used to reinforce behavior by methods such as verbal praise following students' positive efforts (Skinner, 1957). During the following week's observation of the participant teacher's classes, the researcher noticed that she intentionally added variety to her language while praising the students. When she provided feedback to students for their role-play activities, she not only provided feedback to their oral language and body language, but also asked questions based on the contents of their conversations. The specific feedback and relaxed conversation made students feel that they were being listened to and closed the distance between the teacher and students in their large classes.

### Affective factors

Through the discussion and sharing of Mei's practical experiences, several affective factors were identified to be essential in influencing the pedagogy of teaching College English in large classes. Those

factors were motivation, personality, and respect. During one post-observation discussion, the participant teacher mentioned that some students volunteered to answer questions only for their participation grade without practicing enough after class to refine their pronunciation and intonation. On the contrary, the participant teacher shared the experience that she had a previous student who would volunteer to speak English during and out of class. Based on Mei's comments, the researcher combined the theory of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation to analyze students' English learning during and out of the classes (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Below is part of one conversation:

*Intrinsic motivation is when the person really likes to speak English. They learn English because of the love to this language and communicating with native speakers of English. Like the student you mentioned, he is a typical example of having intrinsic motivation in learning English... For students who study English for the postgraduate entrance exam or pass the CET-4 or CET-6 to get their diploma, they are more like learning English because of the extrinsic motivation... However, studies have found that the combination of both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation have the best effect in motivating students' learning.*

The analyzing of theory with a practical real-life example contributed to the participant teacher's understanding of the theory and her students' behavior. The discussion also provided suggestions that teachers who teach large College English classes should pay attention to ways that can stimulate both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation in encouraging students' English learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In one CEVAO course that the researcher observed, a female student volunteered to speak four times during a 100-minute class. The researcher talked with the participant teacher about this student during the third post-observation discussion. In a large class, students who are extroverted and confident would get many more opportunities to speak than those who are more introverted. In addition, some students were used to being called on by the teacher in high school rather than volunteering to answer the questions. Therefore, the participant teacher shared that she would look over the name list before the class and call on students who seldom speak to engage them and provide them a sense of presence during the classes.

In addition, the participant teacher frequently mentioned the word "respect" during the discussions when she showed respect to students through calling on every student's name. The participant teacher would show respect to students through avoiding criticizing them in front of the class which "saved the student's face" according to Chinese culture. The way of protecting personal space and being respectful to the students is a strategy that is particularly important for adult learners (Oprandy, 1999). In addition to showing respect for the students, the participant teacher was also respectful of the school rules. The teacher expressed that although she treated all students like friends after class, when a few students asked her to help them raise their scores for the final grade, she would absolutely refuse that. In the participant teacher's class, every student's grade was proportioned by their class participation, attendance, quiz grades, online learning, and final test. Being just regarding students' grades is evidence that Mei is respectful to her career as a teacher.

### Classroom management

During the post-observation discussions, the participant teacher and the researcher discussed methods of classroom management, including keeping clear routines, monitoring the classroom, and communicating with students. From observations, the researcher identified student helpers as a way for the participant teacher to manage the large class format. The participant teacher established a series of clear routines which were easy to understand and follow. During the observation of the participant teacher's classes, the researcher drew two visual maps of the teacher's circulating in the classrooms, one for the CERW class (see Figure 2) and another for the CEVAO class (see Figure 3). Each curve or line with an arrow in the visual maps represents a movement by the classroom teacher.

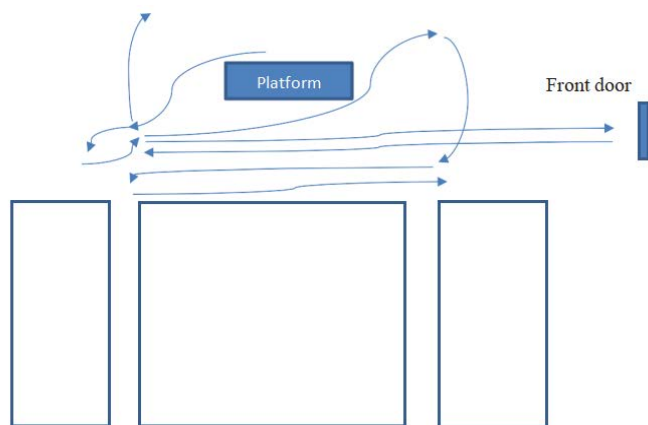


Figure 2. Visual map of participant circulating in the CERW classroom

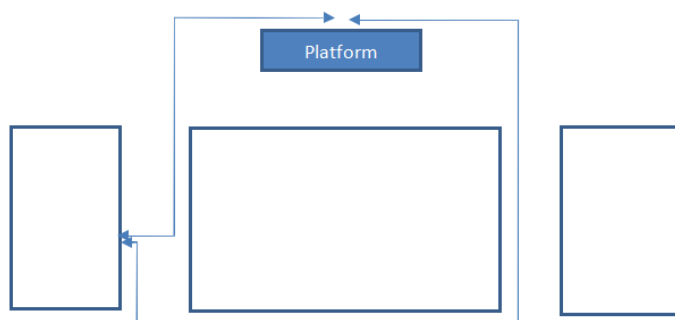


Figure 3. Visual map of participant circulating in the CEVAO classroom

Through analyzing the visual maps combined with previous research, the participant teacher became aware of the power of nonlinguistic communication in engaging the students. Mei decided to walk around in the classroom to engage all students, especially those at the back. To counter the issue of lack of communication with students because of the large class size, the participant teacher intentionally expanded her knowledge about students' interests and spent a lot of time talking with students after class to understand individual students' needs. From observation of the College English classes, the researcher found that the participant teacher's classrooms had many student helpers, which greatly helped her with class routines. Those student helpers sometimes helped the teacher with checking student attendance, distributing dictation quizzes, counting group participation grades, creating an active classroom atmosphere, maintaining classroom equipment, managing class order, and leading 15 minutes of study before the formal class in the morning. Student helpers were essential in reducing classroom teacher's workload, which enhanced students' abilities in responsibility-taking, leadership skills, and class management.

Instructional strategies

Several instructional strategies were analyzed through the following lenses: Mediums used to communicate content, content areas, question types, selection of class activities, and the philosophy of student-centered classes. The researcher applied Fanselow's (1987) Foci for Observing Communication Used in Settings (FOCUS) to observe the latter half of one of the participant teacher's College English classes. The teacher and the researcher discussed the mediums used to communicate content in her College English classes following Fanselow's FOCUS (1987), which included linguistic, non-linguistic, and paralinguistic mediums (see Table 1). During a discussion, the researcher described her observations of mediums in the participant teacher's classes, and shared with her observations combining the theory of mediums used to communicate content:

*In the CEVAO course, you asked the students to look at the picture and answer the question "What do you think happened through looking at the picture?" The question you asked incorporated spoken words in the linguistic medium, the picture students looked [at] was part of the non-linguistic medium. When students read the vocabulary words together with extra emphasis on key words or syllables, the lesson focused on the pronunciation, tone and stress of the words in the paralinguistic medium. Later the students watched the video and filled in the blanks, which applied written words in the linguistic medium. When [you] asked the students to watch it again and let them read their answers, you again used spoken words in the linguistic medium. Lastly, when you let them read after the video with subtitles, this was the pronounced tone of voice and emphasis on a word, which utilized spoken words in the linguistic medium.*



This description of the participant teacher’s CEVAO class combining Fanselow’s (1987) mediums used to communicate content was based on routines used in the CEVAO class. The researcher used the following table to represent the mediums used in the teacher’s CEVAO class (see Table 1). The researcher further added that although this class did not involve gestures and body movement in paralinguistic mediums, the teacher designed the homework to let students have role plays which include the paralinguistic mediums of gestures, body movement, and facial expressions.

After hearing the researcher’s description of the mediums used to communicate content, the participant teacher agreed that the explanation and analysis made the lesson seem more professional. She reflected that the class should increase the opportunities for students to listen and speak, which was a sign of the teacher’s gaining awareness after knowing about the mediums used to communicate content in her CEVAO class.

|                        | Mediums used to Communicate Content          | Activities in the Class  |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Linguistic Mediums     | Spoken words                                 | Asked a question; read the answers; read after the video with subtitles                                  |
|                        | Written words                                | Filled in the blanks   |
| Non-linguistic Mediums | Organized sounds (e.g., chanting, music)     | Read the vocabulary words together in a rhythmic way   |
|                        | Pictures, objects, sketches                  | Looked at the picture; watched the video   |
| Paralinguistic Mediums | Pronounced tone of voice, emphasis on a word | Read the vocabulary words together and read after the teacher with extra emphasis on key words/syllables |
|                        | Gestures, body movement, facial expressions  | Homework role play   |

Table 1. Mediums used to communicate content in Mei’s CEVAO class.

Through the analysis of mediums used to communicate content, it is important to incorporate computers in assisting the participant teacher’s CEVAO lessons in the large classes. Computer-assisted learning could be used in the English classes to add variety to the mediums used to communicate content. With the help of headphones and microphones, the participant teacher and each student’s voice can be heard by everyone in the classroom. This solved one common problem in a large classroom, i.e., that the speaker’s voice could not be clearly heard by others. The computer screen helped each student to see the words more clearly which solved the problem that the written words could not be seen clearly by students in a large classroom. The headphones and computers evidently reduced small talk among the students during class time, which helped them avoid unnecessary distractions. In addition, the using of the computer allowed the teacher to bring authentic materials such as the movie *Inside Out* to the classroom. The computer-assisted learning greatly inspired students’ learning interest, motivation, and engagement for learning English in large classes.

During post-observation discussions with the participant teacher, we talked about the content areas in her classes. According to Fanselow (1987), the content areas which are communicated in English classes include *procedure*, *life*, and *study*. Gebhard’s (1999) study showed that content areas of procedure, such as giving directions or disciplining the students were mentioned a lot in the classroom while teachers seldom mentioned content areas related to life such as general knowledge, personal experiences, or feelings. The participant teacher strongly agreed with the results of Gebhard’s (1999) study, and identified general knowledge such as politics, history, and music of English-speaking countries as the content areas she would like to mention more in her classes.

When asked about points the teacher would like to discuss during the next post-observation discussion, she shared her confusion that sometimes it seemed that students did not like to answer questions since the types of questions she asked lacked effectiveness in stimulating students’ interests to respond and encourage students’ participation. In order to address the issue concerning Mei about the effectiveness of her questions, the researcher observed her two College English Reading and Writing classes using a form based on Bloom’s taxonomy which included six types of questions: Knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom et al., 1984). Based on the observation forms and the researcher’s sharing of Bloom’s taxonomy during the discussion (Bloom et al., 1984), the teacher decided to ask more higher order questions in her class and think over her questions before class to make them more effective and meaningful.

During the first post-observation discussion, Mei shared with the researcher that she was uncertain about the effectiveness of watching the movie *Inside Out* during class time. She shared the following thoughts with the researcher during the discussion:

*I was confused about watching the movie Inside Out during the class for it took too much of the class time. At the beginning of the semester, I told the students that we are going to finish watching this movie during the semester. However, I was thinking about giving up [on] it halfway through. The eleven to twelve minutes of watching, it did not get as much effect as I expected, and it took lots of time during the class. Students could have used this time to read the dialogue or have role plays.*

From the discussion of this dilemma following the steps of attending, thematizing, and reflecting in the Cooperative Development model, the participant teacher was able to gain a deeper understanding of this issue and came up with a satisfactory solution to her concern about the selection of class activities. Through thematizing about the relationship of online learning with movie watching, a possible solution was identified. It would be possible to have the students watch a movie after class and then check oral expressions and practice pronunciation during class time. The participant teacher recognized that the selection of class activities needs to consider the time allotted for classes and the curricular demands, as well as guide students to take time after class time to explore tasks by themselves.

During observation of Mei’s College English classes, the researcher intentionally observed student and teacher talk time. From my observation, the teacher talk time was more than the student talk time during the CERW courses while the student talk time was more than the teacher talk time during the CEVAO courses. By using the patterns of moves from FOCUS to observe the CERW courses and the CEVAO courses (Fanselow, 1987), the most common patterns of moves identified were teacher structured, teacher solicited, student responded, and teacher reacted. The most common source and target combinations during the class time were teacher-to-student and class, then student-to-teacher and class. There were a few student-to-student communications focused on pair discussions and role plays.

Mei shared with the researcher some ideas about the patterns in her large classes during the first post-observation discussion:

*Since there is a large number of students in my class, the teaching model can fall into single pattern. Because of the large number of students, activities such as group discussion did not have as much effect as I thought before. Over time, we have decided to put this method aside for a while.*

If group discussion cannot fit the practical situation of teaching and learning in a large class format, the researcher had been thinking about possibilities or adjustments which could be made to increase the student talk time and create a “teacher-fronted, student-centered” classroom according to the syllabi of College English courses (Wang, 1983, p. 70). The researcher looked up some materials in the following weeks and found a chart called the learning pyramid (Dale, 1947). Through the researcher’s sharing the chart of the learning pyramid (see Figure 4), Mei expressed a paradigm shift to create a “teacher-fronted, student-centered” classroom by incorporating activities such as English presentation, role plays, debates, and speeches to increase the student talk time (Dale, 1947). This can be a reminder for teachers who teach College English in large classes to be aware of the student-centered role they can facilitate in their classrooms.

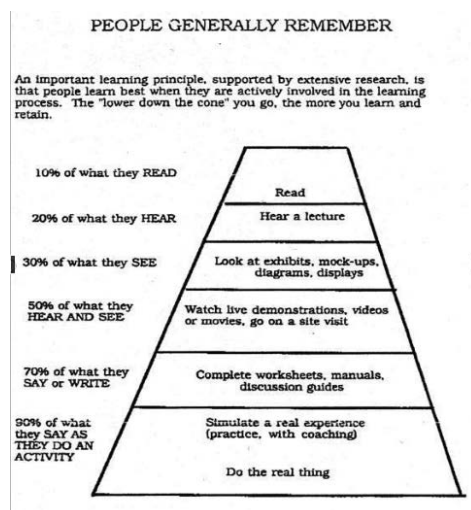


Figure 4. Chart of the learning pyramid. Adapted from *Audio-Visual Methods in Teaching*, Dale (1947)

This section presented the themes generated from the data analysis, which are student participation, affective factors, classroom management, and instructional strategies. First of all, the participant teacher and the researcher discussed several ways of encouraging students to participate in her large College English classes which are group rewards, throwing a beach ball or plush bear, eliciting answers, and providing feedback. Secondly, several affective factors were identified in influencing students' College English learning in large classes. These are motivation, personality, and respect. Thirdly, classroom management aspects in the teacher's College English classes were illustrated. They include clear routines, circulating in the classroom, communication with students, and student helpers. Lastly, instructional strategies were considered during discussions with the participant teacher, which were mediums, content areas, question types, selection of activities, and student-centered.

## **Discussion**

Through the post-observation discussions, this study led to the participant teacher's increased self-awareness of her pedagogy, especially relating to large class teaching, and provided insights for Chinese teachers teaching large College English classes. In addition, this study addressed several sub-research questions from the aspects of influence of a large class format on College English teaching, strategies which might be useful for College English instructors teaching large classes, and findings from the post-observation discussions which might be useful for teacher trainers and mentors.

### Influence of a large class format to College English teaching

In response to the first research sub-question, "In what ways does a large class format influence the teaching of College English courses?" Overall, the participant teacher believed that there were more disadvantages than advantages to teaching College English courses in a large class format. This was in accordance with the literature that teachers in general have negative attitudes towards large class teaching (Devi, 2016; Hayes, 1997; LoCastro, 1989; Shehu & Tafida, 2016; West, 1960). There were clearly observable behaviors in the participant teacher's large classes that influenced her teaching. From my observation, one difficulty was the teacher's and student speakers' voices being heard by others in the classroom. Secondly, the words on the blackboard and PowerPoint slides were hard for students at the back of the classroom to see. Thirdly, the rising temperature and suffocating air during the summer might have influenced the emotions of the teacher and the students in the large classes. Moreover, in some large classrooms the chairs and seats could not be moved. The limited classroom space made it difficult for the teacher to incorporate activities such as group discussions in the classes. This may make it easy for teachers in large classrooms to fall into a single method of instruction with a lack of instructional variety to meet each student's needs. The single method of instruction in large classrooms seemed to make students less engaged and lessons less effective, which further influenced the progress of the course.

During the post-observation discussions, the participant teacher reported several aspects of large classes influencing the teaching of College English courses: Student participation, classroom management, instructional activities, and lack of individual attention. In a large class format, it was difficult for the teacher to get every student to participate in the class. This finding was consistent with the literature that students who need help in large classes often lack individual support from classroom teachers (LoCastro, 1989). The lack of student participation might cause some students to be distracted from the class and have behavioral issues such as playing on their phones or chatting with other students.

Meanwhile, there were many external factors that influenced the teaching of College English courses in a large class format, such as the teacher's heavy workload, the requirements of the course schedule, and the lack of enough resources to support large class instruction. The last phenomenon was in accordance with Ur's (1996) qualitative definition of large classes that the available resources cannot support the number of students in the classroom.

### Strategies for teaching College English in a large class format

Through the document analysis, observations, and post-observation discussions, this study addressed the second sub-research question "What are some strategies revealed in the observations and post-observation discussions that may be useful for instructors teaching College English in large classes?" In order to adapt to the practical situation of teaching College English courses in a large class format, many strategies were identified during the observations and post-observation discussions to address this issue. To address some of the environmental factors influencing instruction in a large class format, the teacher could use a carry-on voice projector whenever he or she moves around in the classroom. The words on the PowerPoint or blackboard need to be big enough and the color needs to be reader-friendly so that students sitting at the back could clearly recognize them. The school needs to provide resources such as

a remote control for the computer to enable the teacher to walk around in the classroom. If possible, language labs should be used for large College English classes to benefit students' English learning. The school should also support teachers who teach College English in large classes without clustering too many lessons in one day.

In order to let students participate more during classes, Mei shared that she would try her best to remember each student's name and call on students by their names to show them respect. During the CEVAO course, Mei had a seating chart, which was used to record each student's name and his or her participation grades. For introverts who did not volunteer to speak, the teacher would go over the name list before the class and at times call on students who seldom speak. During the post-observation discussions, the researcher shared the strategy that the teacher could throw a plush bear or beach ball to attract students' attention. The plush bear or beach ball could be used to randomly pick on students to answer questions or let students take turns when two or more students want to answer at the same time. In addition, the teacher could divide students into several groups based on their seats. If a student in the group correctly answered the question, the group would get participation grade rewards. The teacher could elicit students' ideas through giving them at least three seconds of wait time to think about the answers after asking questions. If no one wanted to answer the question, the teacher could then use encouraging words such as "Somebody have a try?" or "Just give it a shot." If the called-on student kept silent or did not know the answer, the teacher could either simplify or refine the question to make it more understandable to the students.

To encourage students to participate, teachers need to provide non-critical feedback to avoid destroying students' learning initiative. The teacher could repeat the students' answer again to make it clearly heard by others in the large class, and then correct the mistakes through saying the answers correctly. In addition, the teacher could add variety to the way of providing feedback such as having students point out each other's mistakes and giving them participation grades as group rewards. While providing feedback, the teacher can pay attention to the variety of language he or she uses, demonstrate enthusiasm in their tones or emotions, and acknowledge the students' efforts (Borich, 2011). Some other types of rewards include letting another student explain why a response is correct, allowing students to help or tell others the process or procedures of correctly answering the questions, and ask classmates to show admiration for one another's efforts (Borich, 2011).

While teaching in a large class, teachers need to identify students' learning motivations and personalities to accommodate to their individual needs. The teacher could incorporate a variety of mediums to communicate class content, thus making the content more attractive and clearer. General knowledge related to English-speaking countries' cultures, politics, or histories could be incorporated into lessons. The teacher could use authentic materials such as English movies and songs to cultivate students' intrinsic motivation for learning English. In large classes, the teacher needs to be aware of the different personalities influencing the behavior of the students. For students who are extroverts and active in class, the teacher could reward their participation (e.g., bonus marks/scores) to stimulate their initiative. For students who are introverts or prefer safe spaces to sit at the back of the classroom, the teacher could call on them at times to give them a sense of presence and belonging. Lastly, it was important for Mei to show respect to the students whatever the students' grades were in the College English course. When students had behavior issues, it was better to point it out in an indirect way without shaming the students in front of a large number of classmates. To teach in a large class, the teacher needed to be respectful of the school rules and be just in grading students' daily performance and final tests.

Concerning classroom management in a large class, the teacher could set up a series of routines and procedures to make students easy to understand and follow. The teacher could often circulate or sometimes stand at the back of the classroom to teach. To close the distance between teacher and students in the large class, the teacher could intentionally combine students' interests with the class content. The teacher should talk after class with students who seldom speak to relieve their nervousness and get to know more about them and their interests. To involve students in large classes and share the teacher's heavy workload, students could be helpers to assist with sending out assignments, calling the attendance, counting group participation grades, and so on.

For instructional strategies, computer-assisted learning could be used in the CEVAO course to help with students' listening and speaking skills. Teachers in large classes could recommend English learning websites, emails, and social software, including QQ groups, *WeChat* official accounts, and English blogs to share English learning materials with the students. Considering the limited class time and requirements from the course schedule, the teacher could guide students through arranging assignments to let students prepare and practice English after class. In order to engage students during class time and develop their critical thinking ability, higher order questions which involve analysis, synthesis, and

evaluation could be asked to make discussions more meaningful and varied. The teacher should think over the questions before class and be prepared about the course schedule for each different large class. The planning of the course schedule should be more realistic and flexible, leaving the time and space to mobilize students' initiative for participation.

In order to create a "teacher-fronted, student-centered" classroom based on the College English course syllabi (Han, 2017, p. 4), student-centered activities such as English presentations, role plays, debates, and speeches could be used to increase student talk time. A rubric could be designed and provided to students before conducting the activities to show the teacher's expectations. The rubric could include important points such as a time limit, inclusion of interactive activities during presentations, each presenter's contribution, and voice projection.

At the end of the last post-observation discussion, Mei shared her belief that if a teacher has the determination and concentrated attention to think carefully about practical issues encountered during teaching, he or she could achieve the goal of being an excellent teacher. When the teacher puts a lot of effort on researching how to guide students' participation, the students could be affected and actively interact with the teacher.

### **Implications for Teacher Trainers and Mentors**

This study also addressed the third research question "What findings from the post-observation discussions could be useful for teacher trainers and mentors?" In order to balance the relationship between theory and practice, knowledge of educational contexts must be addressed in pre-service teacher training courses to counter issues teachers will face when teaching large classes. The teacher education program should develop courses such as fieldwork to let students observe teachers who teach in such classes.

After observing a cooperating teacher's classroom, a teacher trainee could have post-observation discussions with the cooperating teacher by using a Collaborative Conversation Approach such as the Cooperative Development model. To increase students' self-awareness in reflection, they could write reports or reflective journals to grapple with issues related to teaching in a large class format. If possible, students in the teacher education program could teach trial lessons in real large class contexts and have teacher trainers or classroom teachers observe them. After such experiences, the teacher trainers or classroom teachers could have post-observation discussions with the student teachers. In addition, the teacher education program could invite guest speakers from study abroad educational programs or advanced practitioners in the field of education to share experiences or have one-on-one collaborative conversations with students in the pre-service teacher education program.

Teacher trainers who prepare EFL teachers in in-service teacher education programs could observe the teachers' teaching and then have post-observation discussions following the Cooperative Development model or another Collaborative Conversational Approach. It is important to be aware that the post-observation discussion does not have to lead towards specific results. Sometimes simply sharing and listening could relieve the teacher's anxiety and enhance their confidence. The teacher trainers could guide group post-observation discussions or have collaborative conversations for teachers in the same department. The teacher trainers should combine theories and research findings with practice to be specific about the teachers' contextualized concerns.

This study provides some implications for mentors who work with EFL teachers in large classes. During post-observation discussions, the mentor and the teacher could take turns to be the understander and the speaker as in the Cooperative Development model. Such turn-taking could benefit in promoting a more equitable relationship in the discussions and in exploring topics that both parts are interested in. The mentor should avoid being judgmental about the classroom teacher's pedagogy and provide detailed descriptions based on observation field notes and pedagogically focused observation forms. The mentor should give the teacher enough space and time to reflect on their practices and provide understanding responses. Being a classroom visitor for a week, a month, or even a year is still insufficient to fully capture the classroom instructor's thoughts, ideas, and classroom practices. Therefore, the mentor cannot prescribe what the classroom instructor should or should not do. The mentor could only give suggestions, provide choices, or reference other research or practices. If the teacher is interested in the mentioned research or materials, the mentor could share the resources with the teacher to increase his or her awareness in self-exploring this issue. If possible, the mentor could give suggestions or offer choices connecting research findings and personal experiences without prescribing what the teacher should do.

For a better understanding of an EFL teacher's practice, the mentor could observe the same lesson taught by the same teacher in different large classes to make comparisons and contrasts regarding different pedagogical foci. It is important for the mentor to understand that no matter the length of observations, what the mentor could capture was only part of the teacher's days, weeks, or months of teaching. Therefore, for important findings generated from observations, the mentor needs to discuss the important points with those they observe during the post-observation discussions before making any conclusions. There are always stories behind the classroom behavior that the mentor might not be able to understand which reflects the necessity of the post-observation discussions. Post-observation discussions among teachers of different subjects, between researchers and advanced practitioners, or local teachers with study abroad program teachers can be very helpful to inspire new sparks of thoughts. In addition, both mentor and teachers need to understand that the Cooperative Development model, if utilized, is a process with continuous discovery of new issues. Therefore, they need to realize that changes are possible through systematic practice.

### Conclusion

From the data analysis, four themes were identified that were helpful in answering the general research questions including the concepts of student participation, affective factors, classroom management, and instructional strategies. First of all, the post-observation discussions lead to the participant teacher's increased self-awareness in finding effective ways to encourage student participation in her large College English classes. During the post-observation discussions, several ways were identified which included group rewards, throwing a beach ball or plush bear, eliciting students' answers, and providing encouraging feedback to motivate students' participation. Second, through the discussion and sharing of Mei's practical experiences, several affective factors were identified to be essential in influencing the pedagogy of teaching College English in large classes. Those factors were motivation, personality, and respect. Third, during the post-observation discussions, the participant teacher and the researcher discussed ways of classroom management, including clear routines, circulating in the classroom, communication with students, and student helpers. Finally, instructional strategies were considered during the researcher's discussions with the participant teacher, which were mediums used to communicate content, content areas, question types, selection of activities, and student-centered classrooms. Through the data analysis and the answering of research questions, this study provided several implications to teacher trainers who prepare College English teachers in large classes and mentors who work with such teachers on their professional development.

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to express her deepest gratitude to her dissertation chair Dr. Robert Oprandy. Dr. Oprandy's constant support and encouragement during the writing process of this article are invaluable to the author. The author would also like to express her sincere gratitude to the committee members Dr. Marilyn Draheim and Dr. Delores McNair who provided many feedback for this article. In addition, the author would like to express her heartfelt thanks to all the anonymous reviewers whose efforts made this article possible.

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