

Teaching a Large Class in Hong Kong

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THE SPECIAL CHALLENGE of teaching large classes (Grissmer, 1999) is magnified when teachers face students in a foreign environment where culture and language patterns differ from those in their home countries. To be successful, teachers in a foreign setting must modify their home instructional strategies and tactics to match the backgrounds of the students and the teaching environment.

In this article, I describe how I modified my teaching of a large class (where American communication textbooks were the primary teaching resources) in a Hong Kong tertiary institution and why language, culture, and context differences mandated these adaptations. I describe the rationale for my adaptations, explain the adjustments I have made, and close with some observations and advice to make teaching in a foreign environment more effective and enjoyable.

Course Description

"Essential English Communication Skills for Business" is a one-semester course offered to year-2 Bachelor of Arts for Business (BBA) students twice a year. Students who have completed 200 hours of English enhancement classes are required to take this course, while other students take more advanced business communication courses. The course aims at developing students' written and oral skills to communicate effectively in professional and business contexts.

The teaching mode for the course consists of a one-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial. Over the last three semesters, I have been responsible for coordinating and lecturing to 400 year-2 BBA students each semester. I gave two 50-minute mass lectures, with up to 200 students each session, using PowerPoint slides, and supervised 10 tutors who held weekly one-hour tutorial sessions. The experience level of these tutors varied widely, from native-English

speakers with Master's degrees and some industry experience to second-language speakers who were Master's or PhD students and had no previous industry experience.

Rationale for the Adaptations

To make this large lecture course work, I had to adapt a typical US textbook approach to accommodate issues of language, culture, and context.

Language Adaptations

Language adaptation is necessary as students were listening to lectures in their second language and had varied listening comprehension skills, ranging from individuals who possessed high-intermediate levels (approximately 20 percent of the students) to those who had difficulty understanding anything above the basic (approximately 20 percent).

Students at all language proficiency levels found it difficult to follow the flow and missed nuances of normally paced lectures. Even the most proficient students did not possess adequate listening skills to maintain their attention level over an extended period of 50 minutes: they might comprehend the subject content at the beginning of a lecture but lost concentration because of fatigue. Consequently, the instructor faced an audience with uneven listening skills who had to strain and exert extra energy to understand and follow the lecture content. However, most of the students were at a language comprehension threshold level where, under proper circumstances, they had the necessary background and potential to rapidly increase their listening comprehension competency.

At Hong Kong universities, bilingual students by and large choose Cantonese in their classroom discussions although the medium of instruction is stipulated to be English. Because the peer pressure in the dominant Cantonese language environment restricts the use of English-language communication, Hong Kong students do not have adequate opportunity to practice and improve their English communication skills (Du-Babcock, 1999). Lacking interactive communication competence, most Hong

Kong students do not feel confident enough to use English when Cantonese is an option and thus take much longer to process and understand English-language teaching materials.

Cultural Adaptations

Collectively, different aspects of Chinese culture impact how Hong Kong students behave in large lectures. These influences include collectivism and high-power distance (Hofstede, 1991), situational orientation (Hsu, 1981), loose reckoning concept of time (Ferraro, 1994), collective face behavior (Bond, 1991), and insider-outsider distinctions (Hsu, 1981). Hong Kong students also have been exposed to Western cultural influences (Hong Kong being a former British colony) that may counteract the Chinese cultural influences and make student reaction uneven and unpredictable.

The Chinese characteristic of respecting and treating outsiders differently creates an opportunity for foreign instructors to create their own learning environment. Influenced by their situational orientation (Hsu, 1981), the Chinese students wait for the situation to be defined before acting out their expected roles (how to interact with the lecturer). Consequently, the foreign instructor has an opportunity, as an outsider, to prescribe the situation at the beginning of the semester. The Chinese respect for authority (high-power orientation) and respect for the teacher as a symbol of this authority reinforces this opportunity. However, as an instructor shows an understanding of the Hong Kong environment during the semester, the instructor moves towards becoming an insider and consequently being judged by different criteria (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996).

Reflecting a loose reckoning concept of time (Ferraro, 1994), Hong Kong students, especially for early morning classes, arrive late and filter into the lecture hall after the scheduled starting time. Traditional Chinese culture teaches individuals to suppress and hide their emotional reactions and therefore Western instructors have to adjust to different and more passive reaction to their lectures than with Western audiences. In addition, students may feel they will lose face if they acknowledge that they do not under-

stand concepts presented by evidencing visible facial gestures and body language or by individually asking for clarification of concepts after class or during office hours. In interacting with instructors, students feel more comfortable in small groups rather than as individuals, reflecting their collective orientation. In sum, the dual influences of Chinese culture and Western culture need to be taken into consideration in lecturing to large Hong Kong classes.

Context Adaptations

Foreign instructors and Hong Kong students do not share the same contextual backgrounds. As such, Hong Kong students are largely unfamiliar with US business practices and environment (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2000). In addition, Hong Kong students react most positively to local examples of Hong Kong firms and even of foreign firms in China where they are more familiar with the background context of the illustrations.

Foreign lecturers in Hong Kong need to make allowance for contextual assumptions of their American business communication textbooks. These textbooks assume familiarity with American contextually based examples and language, including slang and colloquial expressions, that Hong Kong students are not familiar with and cannot relate to. One of the challenges in lecturing in Hong Kong is to build upon and supplement the theoretical foundations established in an American textbook by using local examples and illustrations that the students can relate to and understand.

Description of the Adaptations

The adaptations I have made can be divided into three areas: language proficiency, culture, and context adjustments.

Language Proficiency Adjustments

I made allowance for students with lower and uneven listening skills by adjusting my lecturing pace and the amount of presented materials. In my three semesters of teaching business communication, I have reduced the number of major points to be covered

from five to three in a 50-minute lecture. In doing so, I was able to better pace myself and elaborate key points in detail without rushing. I also have shifted my emphasis from lecturing on theory to illustrating the theory. Implementing these changes has made it easier for students to follow my lectures, and the illustration reinforces their understanding of the concepts.

I adjusted my lecturing pace over the semester. In a mutual and reinforcing process, the students adjusted to my speaking style and accent (students are more in tune with British or Australian accents), and I in turn increased my pace as they developed and "tuned" their listening skills. In the process of mutual adjustment between the students and myself, I continually reminded myself to speak clearly and distinctly, a constant in the adjustment process.

My speaking strategy was to start the semester at a language level where all the students could understand and gradually raise the language level to cover more advanced vocabulary over the semester. As the students were studying the text in a parallel process, I increasingly used the professional language contained in the textbook. During this process, I strived, but did not always succeed, to avoid slang or colloquial expressions. I continually monitored student reaction and gradually adjusted to the appropriate language level. To facilitate this process, I have developed skills to better "read" and interpret student reaction.

Cultural Adjustments

A major problem in teaching large classes in Hong Kong was that students arrived late. I always came five minutes early to set an example for the students and to make sure the computer was operating. By coming earlier and starting on time, I established an important norm for conducting the class. For example, on the first day of the lecture, typically 80 percent of the students were present at the designated starting time, but I did not wait for the late students. By the third week of the lecture, I found that punctuality became a class norm.

"Cutting" class also was a problem associated with teaching mass lectures, as illustrated by one colleague whose attendance

rate was about 25 percent. Building on the Chinese cultural concept of shame rather than guilt for inappropriate behavior (Bond, 1991; Hsu, 1981), I established the practice of selectively taking attendance by randomly picking out and calling the names of 10 to 15 students each lecture. This policy reinforced the importance of regular attendance for students in a collective society who did not want to be singled out (shamed) for deviant behavior.

After the lecture I stayed to answer individual and group questions. In fact, I sometimes ended my lectures five minutes early, allowing and encouraging students to directly interact with me. I ended the class early on a selective basis and for lecture topics where the need for clarification and amplification was likely. In this process I dealt first with individual questions where the answer was “yes” or “no.” During this time period, I found that students formed small groups of three or four, formulated questions, and appointed a student with high English proficiency as group spokesperson. I then interacted with the group through their language link-pin (see Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001). For each lecture I interacted with two to four groups, and different groups came forward during the semester. However, the composition of these groups was highly stable. In interacting with these groups I found that my intermediate listening proficiency in Cantonese was helpful; I could sometimes understand the questions as they were encoding the message before translation.

Context Adjustments

Context adjustments complemented and reinforced my adjustments for language proficiency. In my lectures and on the Power-Point slides, I tried to eliminate slang and colloquial expressions. I also provided detailed background information and a frame of reference for all non-Hong Kong examples.

My context adjustments focused on the choice and explanation of the examples. My strategy was to balance the number of local (Hong Kong-based) and foreign examples (usually US-based), since Hong Kong students related more closely to and understood local examples better than foreign examples. Consequently, I con-

centrated on using Hong Kong examples in the early weeks of the semester to facilitate their understanding. As the students were familiar with the background of local examples, I did not have to spend much time on providing the contextual details necessary for foreign or US examples. Later in the semester, I not only gradually introduced foreign examples but also was careful to put in adequate contextual background in my explanations. My strategy in choosing examples was to balance the mix of local and international examples so that students gained a balanced and comprehensive picture of business communication, realizing that Hong Kong is an international business center.

My adaptation in this area has been supported by a continual search for local examples. I monitor the Asian business and general press, and, fortunately, my research on international business communication in Asia has yielded examples as well as allowed me to establish credibility and interest. In general, the theoretical material is the same as I would use in the United States, while the examples and illustrations represented a balance of local and international communication practices.

Concluding Comments

I close by setting forth some personal reflections, observations, and advice for making teaching large classes in a foreign environment a more effective and pleasurable experience. As an overview, I believe that successful overseas teaching is a function of blending continuity (using skills that made one successful at home) and adaptation (modifying for language, culture, and context differences in the foreign country). In making my adjustments I have followed a gradual process of introducing adaptations as I have learned to better sense and interpret student reactions and feel more comfortable.

Differing student backgrounds and much less positive reinforcement in my lectures have been major factors I have had to learn about. When the students did not respond positively, my initial tendency was to unconsciously make my lecture points more emphatically and increase my pace of lecturing. This tactic not

only gave me a false sense of control but also created the effect of worsening the situation. Rather, I have learned to better pace my lectures and not react to my previously learned cues. My intellectual acknowledgment of this phenomenon came before teaching in Hong Kong, but my behavioral adjustment occurred only after I had taught in Hong Kong.

My adjustments were carried out at a greater expenditure of energy that I had anticipated because I could not “feed” off the energy supplied by the student audience as I had in my US teaching experience. A major personal adaptation has been learning not to unconsciously expend emotional energy but to better channel and focus my energy as I better interpret student reaction to my lectures.

I have learned on an intellectual level and gradually internalized that mass lecturing is a two-way adjustment process between the students and an instructor in any particular course. To generalize, I believe there is a two-way adaptation between the instructor and the students. Over time, an instructor develops sensing and delivery skills, and students make allowances for non-Canadian faculty as outsiders at the beginning of a course but may well increase their expectations as the semester unfolds.

Looking back over my experience in teaching large classes in Hong Kong, I see that I have gradually modified my teaching approach and style as I have concurrently increased my sensing and delivering skills. In this process I have had to unlearn certain behaviors (especially, how to interpret student reactions) and adjust to the cultural, language, and context factors in the Hong Kong environment.

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Large Lecture Format: Some Lessons Learned

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While learning has many ends, teaching has only one: to enable or cause learning.

— K. Patricia Cross

IN THE SPIRIT OF “bottom line” communication, I will share some surprising results from our program’s recent experiment in using a large lecture format to teach an upper-division business communication course: approximately 90-95 percent of our students *liked* the large lecture format, and the quality of their communication deliverables was as good as that produced by students who took the course in the traditional small class (25 students) format.

Some disclaimers first:

