Effective Teaching in Large Multilevel Classes: Beliefs and Practices of Experienced EFL Elementary School Teachers

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This study aimed to explore two experienced EFL elementary school teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in teaching large multilevel classes. Four research questions were addressed: (1) What are the teachers' beliefs toward teaching English in large multilevel classes? (2) What classroom practices are demonstrated that correspond to these beliefs?

(3) What difficulties do the teachers encounter in the process of teaching, and how do these difficulties affect the teachers' beliefs and decision-making procedures? (4) What teaching strategies are identified by the teachers as examples of effective classroom practices which maximize students' learning in large multilevel classes? Various forms of data were collected to enhance the validity of the study namely, questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and the researchers' reflective journals. Findings showed that both teachers insisted on following the Nine-year Integrated Curriculum Guidelines and focused their teaching on the needs of the majority. Though students' varied English proficiency and other contextual factors hindered the teachers in practicing effective teaching, both teachers were still striving to conduct meaningful communicative activities such as pair work, group work, and multilevel homework. Results of this study highlight the importance of teachers' beliefs concerning their classroom practices. More specifically, successful implementation of effective teaching practices relies on the teachers' competence and perseverance in balancing their practices between benefiting the majority and facilitating the individual. Pedagogical implications for frontline teachers, parents, school administrators, teacher training programs, and educational authorities are discussed.

Key Words: effective teaching, large multilevel classes, EFL teachers, beliefs and practices

INTRODUCTION

As a result of globalization, English has established its steadfast status as the all-purpose, worldwide language. Since English has been acknowledged as the main communication tool worldwide, EFL countries, such as South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and Taiwan have long incorporated English teaching and learning into their formal education (**Y. -M.** Chiang, 2003).

Similar to other EFL countries, the government of Taiwan also aims to equip our young learners with the ability to communicate in English and to connect with the global village (**Y. -M.** Chiang, 2003).

According to the Nine-year Integrated Curriculum Guidelines, starting in 2005, all public elementary schools in Taiwan were to include English as a required curriculum from grade three (Ministry of Education, 2006). Nevertheless, a nationwide survey on the English teaching situation in Taiwan conducted by the CitiSuccess Fund in 2003 revealed that 80% of the elementary schools in Taiwan had already started their English programs ahead of the Curriculum Guidelines (Y. -C. Chen, 2004). This finding indicated that, despite the established English policy, most parents in Taiwan found it essential to develop children's English proficiency at younger ages. As children in Taiwan begin to receive English education at different ages, it is inevitable that these young learners have varied English proficiency when they begin their English learning at school. When these children start to learn English, their teachers would encounter strenuous challenges of developing and implementing effective teaching to meet their diverse English learning experiences and proficiency (Liao, 2007).

Studies on EFL teaching revealed that such classes caused fortifiable teaching dilemmas for teachers in several aspects, such as lesson planning (Huang, 2003), teaching strategies (Hsu, 2005), classroom management (Y. -M. Chiang, 2003), and learning assessment (**Chen, 2003**). Besides students' varied proficiency, limited class time and difficulties in classroom management also prohibited teachers from meeting individual student's learning needs (**Chen, 2003**). In response to the above teaching difficulties, researchers and educators in Taiwan have been active in developing various effective teaching practices or strategies as solutions for teaching large multilevel classes, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Liao, 2003), cooperative learning (Liang, 2002), and flexible ability grouping (Y. -M. Chiang, 2003).

Notwithstanding the efforts made by the researchers and educators, successful implementation of effective teaching practices still relies on English teachers themselves. Teachers' beliefs, among other factors, play the crucial role in their decisions for classroom practices (Borg, 2003). Thus, to teach effectively in large multilevel classes, teachers play fundamental roles in implementing effective teaching practices in their classrooms.

Subsequent researches emphasized that teachers' beliefs and practices are context-sensitive, dynamic, and open for change (Golombek, 1998). In addition to the effect of the contextual factors on teachers' beliefs, other researches showed that teachers will reconstruct and reform their beliefs and practices through teaching experiences (Richards, Tung & Ng, 1992). According to Feikes (1995), teachers are seen as active learners who constantly improve their teaching as they reflect upon their experiences.

In sum, different teachers have different preferences in classroom strategies which tend to be constructed and reconstructed in response to the various contextual needs of the teaching environment and to their reflective thinking (Borg, 2003). In Taiwan, teaching English to large multilevel classes has become one of the major contextual factors which challenge EFL teachers' beliefs in effective teaching and their decision-making in the classroom (Y. -Z. Chiang, 2003; Huang, 2003). The present study, thus, aimed to explore the experienced EFL elementary school teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in teaching large multilevel classes within different school contexts in Taiwan. More specifically, this study intends to address the following research questions:

1. What are the teachers' beliefs toward teaching English in large multilevel classes?
2. What classroom practices are demonstrated that correspond to these beliefs?
3. What difficulties do the teachers encounter in the process of teaching, and how do these difficulties affect the teachers' beliefs and decision-making procedures?
4. What teaching strategies are identified by the teachers as examples of effective classroom practices which maximize students' learning in large multilevel classes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of teaching large multilevel classes has long been acknowledged and widely discussed by teachers and educators globally (Hess, 2001; Tomlinson, 1999). As defined by Balliro (1997), "any classroom is really multilevel, because we all bring a range of abilities and aptitudes with us to any learning situation" (p. 6).

Teaching Large Multilevel Classes in Elementary Schools

The Outline Protocol of the Nine-year Integrated Curriculum Guidelines, proposed by the Ministry of Education, listed three curriculum goals for English teaching and learning in the

elementary school level (Ministry of Education, 2006): (1) Cultivating students with basic communication ability in English. (2) Arousing students' interests in learning English. (3) Providing students with the knowledge of both domestic and foreign culture and customs.

Elementary schools are encouraged to organize and accommodate the school-based curriculum upon consideration of individual school conditions, parental expectations, and students' needs (Ministry of Education, 2006). However, what seems to be a positive curriculum innovation becomes a general concern for English teaching in Taiwan. Research on the implementation of the Curriculum Guidelines showed that large multilevel classes have caused major obstacles for teachers when they try to enforce the new curriculum goals (Chen, 2003). EFL teachers in Taiwan stressed that they were challenged to enhance individual learning outcomes in the classes, especially when the students possess diverse English proficiency and learning priorities (Y. -Z. Chiang, 2003). Commonly reported difficulties teachers have encountered when teaching large multilevel classes were large class size, individual differences, limited class time, ineffective teaching strategies, and inadequate teaching materials. Besides, difficulty in classroom management and deficiencies in employing multiple classroom assessment methods also hindered teachers from implementing effective teaching (Hess, 2001). Apparently, the dilemma of teaching English to large multilevel classes, especially in the elementary schools, has been put in the spotlight (Chung & Hsu, 2005).

Significance of Teachers' Beliefs on Their Practices

A considerable amount of researches supported that teachers' beliefs play a crucial role in the decision-making of classroom practices (Bailey et al., 2001). Bailey et al. (2001) noted that teaching is very similar to the concept of "parenting" (p. 15). Parents tend to raise their children the way they were brought up. Likewise, teachers are likely to teach the way they were taught. Since teachers have different learning experiences, they will eventually come up with diverse teaching principles and develop a personalized set of preferred classroom practices (Bell, 2005). In addition to personal learning experiences, internal factors such as teachers' beliefs and personalities, and external factors such as the education environment would also influence how teachers present their classroom practices (Smith, 2001). Woods (1996) stressed that experienced teachers are inclined to enhance professional development by constantly

monitoring, elaborating, and developing their teaching strategies along with their experiences, which is why they tend to develop a more sufficient knowledge of teaching strategies and routines to implement in the classroom (Tsui, 2003).

Teaching large multilevel classes is, without a doubt, an extremely demanding and challenging task. In Taiwan, a number of studies conducted on EFL teachers' beliefs and practices towards various instructional methods have revealed that contextual limitations such as large classes, individual differences, and limited class time have significant influence in English teachers' classroom practices. For example, Liao (2003) conducted a study about two Taiwanese senior high school EFL teachers' beliefs towards Communicative Language Teaching. The two teachers pointed out that exams and contextual factors such as large class size and the twin peek phenomenon caused setbacks in the teacher's teaching process. **Kuo (2005) investigated EFL junior high school teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards normal class grouping. Findings showed that teachers held negative beliefs towards teaching large multilevel classes due to the difficulty in classroom management, the challenges encountered when planning curriculum instructions, and the predicament in assessing students' learning achievements.** Chung and Hsu's (2005) article on the EFL teaching situation in Taiwan concluded that teachers encountered difficulty in teaching large multilevel classes because most teachers preferred to use whole-class teaching strategies. According to the study, in whole-class teaching, students with different English proficiency had uneven opportunities to participate in classroom interaction. Students who responded to teachers' questions eagerly were usually those with better English proficiency. On the other hand, students with lower English proficiency could only play as onlookers during these teacher-student interactions, making them more afraid or even become indifferent towards learning English.

METHODOLOGY

The present study aims to investigate experienced EFL elementary school teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching large multilevel classes. To enhance the validity of the study, different forms of data were collected using questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations.

Participants

Two experienced EFL elementary school teachers were invited to participate in this study, Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin. The two teachers were recommended by the researcher's advisor due to their excellent teaching and many years of teaching experience.

Ms. Chou. During the present study, Ms. Chou taught at an elementary school located in a city in the north of Taiwan. She has been an English teacher at the target school for over seven years. Ms. Chou's school was located in a metropolitan area in northern Taiwan. The school was well-known for it's impetus to bilingual education. Starting from grade three, students had three English classes per week. Also, to promote students' English proficiency and conform to parental expectations, the school used English textbooks imported from the United States. For the present study, one second-grade class and one fifth-grade class were chosen by Ms. Chou as the target classes to be observed. The second-grade target class, Class A, was composed of thirty-five students. Class B, the fifth-grade class, was composed of thirty-two students. Same as Class A, approximately 95% of the students have already learned English in cram schools.

Ms. Yin. Ms. Yin has been an English teacher for about ten years. It was her seventh year of teaching in the current school. Ms. Yin had been teaching the sixth-graders since she started working in the current school. Though she had been teaching the same textbook for over seven years, Ms. Yin remained active in developing innovative teaching practices and had employed various effective teaching strategies to present various teaching contents in the English textbook. To promote student's English proficiency and to fulfill parental expectations, three versions of English textbooks were used for different grade levels. All three versions were ESL teaching materials used in the United States, which were more advanced in level and were rich with American cultural contents. To help the researcher observe different teaching situations in large multilevel classes, Ms. Yin was generous in allowing the researcher to observe three six-grade classes, Class C, D, and E. According to Ms. Yin, the three classes chosen were different in their learning atmosphere, students' overall English proficiency, and their discipline in class.

Data Collection

The present study collected data through multiple sources to achieve a more holistic view of the teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in large multilevel classes (Yin, 2003). Four methods were adopted, including teacher questionnaire, teacher interviews and classroom observations.

Teacher Questionnaire. Before teacher interviews and classroom observations, the teacher participants were asked to complete a teacher questionnaire (see Appendix A). The purpose for adopting the teacher questionnaire is to gain the participants' background information (Gillham, 2000). The questionnaire was constructed with reference to the related studies on teacher's beliefs and teaching large multilevel classes[1].

Teacher Interviews. To yield a more comprehensive view of the teachers' beliefs and practices, semi-structured interviews and post-observation interviews were employed in the study (Nien, 2002). Semi-structured interviews consisted of a set of open-ended questions formulated based on the literature related to teachers' beliefs and practices and about teaching English to large multilevel classes (Y. -Z. **Chiang, 2003;** Nien, 2002). The researcher structured and subsumed the semi-structured interviews into three sections: (1) teachers' beliefs and practices towards teaching English; (2) difficulties the teachers have encountered; and (3) the effective strategies the teachers have adopted when teaching large multilevel classes (see Appendix B). Six semi-structured interviews were conducted for each teacher. Interviews were scheduled at a time convenient to the teacher. The average length of the interviews was about 30 to 40 minutes. After each teaching session, if the teachers had free time, a 10 to 20 minutes post-observation interview was conducted to probe and clarify the participants' beliefs and practices towards the class just observed.

Classroom Observations. Classroom observations of this study were conducted from April of 2008 to June of 2008. Both teachers were observed and interviewed according to their convenient time. A total of six class periods for each teacher were observed, recorded, transcribed, translated, and analyzed.

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[1] The questionnaire is constructed with reference to Y. -C. Chen (2004)**,** Y. H. Chen (2004), Hsu (2003), Huang (2003), **Lin (2003), Liu (2004), and** Nien (2002).

Data Analysis

Miles and Huberman defined the process of data analysis into three synchronal activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10-11).

Data reduction. Data reduction is the "process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10) the collected data. Based on data reduction, all the data collected in this study were analyzed and organized to clearly present the teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching large multilevel classes, including the teacher questionnaire, transcripts of interviews and classroom observations.

Data display. Yin (2003) noted that a clear and organized data display facilitates the researcher to better organize and focus the research conclusion drawn from the large amount of data.

Conclusion drawing and verification. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data analysis is a continuous enterprise where various preliminary conclusions are drawn and revised before the final conclusions of the research are made. Faced with such a large amount of data collected, the researcher started to review, organize, and pre-analyze the collected evidence from the beginning of the data collection period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Beliefs Toward Teaching English in Large Multilevel Classes

Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin both viewed elementary school education as compulsory education. Ms. Chou insisted that "elementary school education is regarded as compulsory education, not gifted education" (TIC[2], 20080415). Hence, when teaching large multilevel classes, both teachers believed that they should focus on instructing the majority before accommodating diverse students' needs.

As Tomlinson (1999) suggested, "Flexibility is the hallmark of a differentiated classroom" (p. 15). The findings of this study found that both teachers showed a great amount of flexibility in various teaching aspects such as teacher's role, lesson planning, teaching practices, and assessment approaches in the large multilevel class.

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[2] Data notations: TIC, teacher interview with Ms. Chou; TIY, teacher interview with Ms. Yin.

Ms. Chou believed that teachers should be flexible in adjusting their roles when instructing different grade levels.

When I [Ms. Chou] teach them [fifth graders] English or moral principles, I will take the role as a teacher. However, during activities, I wish to return to the role as a friend because they will be more willing to share their thoughts with me.... On the other hand, when teaching lower grade levels, I become more directed and teacher-centered because the kids are too young…. I need to remind them about the little things in daily life [such as monitoring their personal hygiene habits and classroom behaviors]. (TIC, 20080502)

Ms. Yin stressed that "a different class is a different teaching context" (TIY, 20080424). In order to promote effective teaching, she would adjust her teaching styles and pace in accordance with the learning characteristics of the class.

Findings showed both Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin had no major complaints in implementing the Nine-year Integrated Curriculum Guidelines in their differentiated classrooms. In fact, both teachers have accepted large multilevel classes as a fixed factor and planned their practices in accordance with such teaching contexts. As noted by Tsui (2003), "For expert teachers, the context is very much an integral part of their teaching act" (p. 30). Hence, it can be suggested that after many years of teaching experiences, Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin have already developed a holistic and integral understanding of Taiwan's education policies, the situation of large multilevel classes, and to what extent they are able to maximize their students' learning.

Difficulties Teachers Encountered in the Process of Teaching

Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin reported several difficulties that have been indicated in previous studies such as large class sizes and limited class time (Y. -Z. Chiang, 2003; Wang, 2006). Besides, Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin also noted that and inadequate teaching materials, students' individual differences in English competence, and difficulties in teaching different grade levels also hindered their teaching.

Both Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin reported that the textbooks imported from the United States were too challenging for their students to digest. Thus, to achieve effective learning, Ms. Chou planned her activities based on meaningful contexts such as story telling and role plays. On the other hand, Ms. Yin would adopt the practice of whole text translations. According to Ms. Yin, students were able to comprehend the context better through translations and were

able to use the vocabulary correctly in sentence pattern practices.

Students' individual differences in English competence also constrained the teachers in conducting effective teaching. In order to promote effective teaching, both teachers made full use of the advanced students' English competence in their instructions. For example, Ms. Yin would ask the advanced students to help her translate the vocabulary and reading passages into Chinese. Ms. Chou would encourage the advanced learners to explain grammatical rules for the class.

Besides the influencing factors mentioned above, Ms. Chou also commented on the difficulties encountered when teaching different grade levels. According to Ms. Chou, large multilevel classes did not cause teaching difficulties in her second grade class because the students had little English background knowledge and were more enthusiastic in participating classroom activities. However, Ms. Chou noticed a clear-cut difference between the two extreme levels in her fifth grade class. Ms. Chou pointed out that some of the slower learners have already lost interest in learning. The same problem was also reported by Ms. Yin when she talked about some of her sixth-graders being indifferent towards classroom activities because of their poor English competence or lack of learning interest. The two teachers reported that it becomes harder for slower learners to regain confidence in English when they reach higher grade levels. This finding was correspondent with Y. H. Chen's (2004) statement that "the numbers of underachievers tended to increase with the students' grade levels" (p. 92). In response to such dilemma, Ms. Yin gave the same suggestions as Chen, which was the urgent need to practice immediate remedial support starting from the lower grade levels.

Teaching Strategies Identified by the Teachers as Effective Classroom Practices

Research in teaching effectiveness have suggested that, to promote effective teaching, teachers should learn to reflect on their own teaching and change their deeply-held beliefs according to their teaching experiences, teaching context, and students' characteristics, (Borg, 2003; Tsui, 2003).

Establish Class Rules and Teaching Routines. In large multilevel classes, it is difficult for teachers to care for each individual at all times. Ms. Yin noted that setting class rules helped her to maintain classroom order and conduct her lessons more smoothly. As noted by Ms. Yin,

Students would never learn well in a noisy classroom environment…. No matter how well I [Ms. Yin] teach, no matter how many supplementary materials I bring to the class, no matter how enthusiastic I am on the stage, if the students are chatting and playing throughout the lesson, everything would be useless. (TIY, 20080424)

Similarly, Ms. Chou noted the importance for students to take responsibility in their own learning. By setting up rules as routines, students would know what they are expected from the teacher, how they are supposed to behave in the classroom, and what they should do to achieve effective learning outcomes.

Carry Out Guided Practices. Ms. Chou's pointed out that most advanced learners could immediately respond to the teachers' questions without extra explanation from the teacher. On the other hand, the slower learners needed more time to process and digest the new information. Therefore, Ms. Chou practiced a three-step sequence when carrying out communicative activities in her large multilevel classes: teacher demonstration, advanced and average students practice, and slower learner practice. Ms. Chou believed that after listening to the teacher's demonstration and observing how their classmates participate in the activities, the slower learners would feel less anxious and more confident in speaking out the language. Such strategy echoed to one of the main aspects of the Natural Approach (NA), which is to delay students' oral production time and provide students with sufficient comprehensible input before asking them for feedback (Brown, 2001).

Practice Heterogeneous and Homogeneous Group Work. According to Chung and Hsu (2005), cooperative learning enabled students to learn from one another, accept individualities, and work together as a group. In order to let students practice their language fluency as much as possible during the limited instruction time, Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin included various heterogeneous and homogeneous group works in their teaching. In fact, Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin suggested some key points when practicing group work. (1) Always give clear instructions before the activity. (2) Group work is only effective when classroom management is assured. (3) During group practices, teachers should walk to each group and assess the students' learning process. (4) Teachers can seize the opportunity to practice one-to-one remedial instruction for slower learners during group work. (5) Teachers should encourage advanced learners to conduct peer tutoring and assist slower learners in completing the task. (6) After group work activities,

teachers should ask each group to share their learning and thoughts with the whole class.

Assign Multilevel Homework. Ms. Chou preformed in-class ability grouping in her fifth grade class and divided the students into three colors (red for advanced, blue for average, and green for slower learners) based on their English proficiency. Ms. Chou reported that, due to time limitation, she preferred whole-class teaching or group work during class hours, but she would always give her students multilevel homework assignments.

Now we [Ms. Chou, fifth-grade class] are learning comparatives. If average students are able to produce sentences like 'My mom is younger than my dad.' That's good enough. As for slower learners, if they can write out the words 'bigger, smaller,' I would be really grateful. For top students, I will ask them to write a composition. They have to make three to four sentences and compose a paragraph. They can add words besides the ones listed in the textbook. For example, we've only learned 'bigger, smaller, faster, shorter' in the class, but they are encouraged to use other words they know, like 'cooler.' (TIC, 20080415)

According to Ms. Chou, students had to complete their work in compliance with their ability to receive the same grades. Ms. Chou's teaching strategy harmonized with Tomlinson's suggestion that "Goals of a differentiated classroom are maximum growth and individual success" (p. 15). In large multilevel classes, teachers should provide differentiated activities to enable students to learn at their own pace and to work in accordance with their different proficiency levels (Corley, 2005).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed to investigate two experienced EFL elementary school teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in teaching large multilevel classes in hope to promote teaching effectiveness in the elementary school level. Overall speaking, Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin's teaching practices were generally consistent with their beliefs. In terms of the teacher's beliefs toward teaching English to large multilevel classes, both teachers believed that they should teach according to the Curriculum Guidelines and focus their teaching target towards the majority of the class. Moreover, both teachers firmly believed that teachers should demonstrate flexibly in their instructions such as pair work, group work, and multilevel homework assignments.

As for the difficulties in instructing large multilevel classes, Ms. Chou and Ms. Yin's

teaching effectiveness were greatly affected by contextual variables such as large class sizes, limited class time, student's individual differences, inadequate teaching materials, and students' individual differences. Both teachers noted that if the textbooks were appropriate for students' level, they would have more time to design extended activities for the average and advanced learners and provide one-to-one remedial instructions for the slower learners.

In conclusion, results of this study highlighted the importance of teacher's beliefs on their classroom practices. In order to practice effective teaching in multilevel classes, teachers have to adjust their attitudes and respect the fact that large multilevel classes are a natural phenomenon. It is believed that, if teachers conduct effective teaching solutions to minimize the gap between students' English competence, their students would eventually benefit from their practices and achieve optimal learning outcomes.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the present study offer several pedagogical implications respectfully made for the frontline teachers, students' parents, the school administrators, teacher training programs, and educational authorities.

First, it is suggested that the frontline teachers need to become more aware of how their beliefs influence their teaching, and how their classroom practices eventually affect their student's learning outcomes. Teachers should learn to reflect on their teaching and change their deeply-held beliefs according to their teaching experiences, teaching context, and students' characteristics in order to minimize the gap between teachers' beliefs and their practices. Also, Ms. Chou stressed that teachers should maintain a communicative network with students' homeroom teachers and their parents in order to keep track of students' learning progress and offer appropriate practices to meet each student's needs.

Second, as mentioned by Ms. Yin, teachers, parents, and students form an effective learning triangle, each member has to contribute in the learning process in order to maximize their learning. More specifically, teachers should try their best to conduct effective teaching practices even within the limited amount of class time; students should pay attention and enthusiastically participate in classroom activities; and parents should help their children review what they have learned at school. In this way, it would be assured that students would gain solid English competence.

Third, school administrators are suggested to provide a mutual space and time for English

teachers to exchange their thoughts and problems in the process of instruction. Thus, teachers could seek practical and effective instruction strategies together to overcome the difficulties in teaching. Also, school administrators should constantly listen to teachers' suggestions and try their upmost to provide necessary assistance for teachers to practice effective classroom practices. Besides the schools, teacher training programs should address to the teaching dilemmas caused by large multilevel classes and provide more in-service training programs, seminars, and workshops related to such issues.

Finally, if teachers, parents, school administrators, and educational authorities could all contribute to meet students' learning needs, it is hoped that large multilevel classes would no longer be interpreted as an insolvable teaching dilemma for EFL teachers in Taiwan.

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