

**Language class - size survey findings, 1998 - 99:
If 'small' is not small, then bigger is better?**

Paul A. Beaufait

This paper reports on a survey regarding foreign language class sizes at the Prefectural University of Kumamoto. Though the scope of the survey has been limited, focusing mainly upon courses that an individual instructor has taught, the purpose of the survey is formative. Its primary aims have been to explore the size and nature of the so-called 'small' English classes offered in the Administrative Studies faculty and to draw implications for learner development. Secondary aims are to contribute to a growing body of data for language instructors, non-language instructors, and university administrators to use in making informed decisions regarding the future of foreign language education at this university in general and future class sizes in particular. In short, initial survey findings delivered as a draft of this paper in 1998 failed to sway the Administrative Studies faculty from deciding to 'restructure' its language program by introducing larger English classes. Preliminary findings failed to deflect decisions to increase the class sizes of required English courses to approximately double what they had been while the faculty was under Ministry of Education supervision as a new academic unit. This situation deserves continuing scrutiny from administrative as well as educational perspectives. (199 words)

At the beginning of the 1998 - 99 academic year, I surveyed four Administrative Studies English classes. My objective was to assess students' understanding of the concept 'shouninzuu kyōiku,' which translates

roughly as “education of small numbers of people.” This is a catch phrase used on one hand to promote some kind of value-added (instructor-intensive) learning experience for students, while on the other hand it has been used to justify large course loads for instructors of small classes. I interpret it quite literally as “education in small class settings,” but what does small mean? Is it a gimmick or an educational standard? Correct me if I am mistaken; I thought small English classes were a “pillar” of the five, now going-on-six year old undergraduate program in the faculty of Administrative Studies at the Prefectural University of Kumamoto, in other words: a standard upon which students choosing to study here could depend. Perhaps they could have depended on it a year ago, but now the faculty makes no bones about offering English classes for 40 or more students instead of what originally was to have been classes of up to 25 students.

I reiterated the survey at the beginning of the 1999-2000 academic year, the year the Administrative Studies faculty inaugurated its ‘regular’ as opposed to ‘small’ sized English classes. Targets, if not definitions, of class sizes had been published in conjunction with curricular revisions which put ‘small’ classes at 20 to 25 students and ‘regular’ classes at 40 students per class (Heisei 11 nendo eigo kamoku no komasu nado no shisan, note 1 [c. Oct. 1998]). In order to survey at least one third of the students newly matriculated in 1999, who now enjoy the questionable privilege of being the first to experience both ‘regular’ and ‘small’ classes - simultaneously, I enlisted the cooperation of two colleagues to survey their ‘regular’ classes. Findings of the second round of surveys (Secondary findings, below) follow the initial findings and interpretations from the first round of class-size surveys which I undertook in 1998.

My prior understanding had been that small classes meant 25 or fewer students in university language classes.¹ This understanding seems to have been confirmed by the curricular revision committee (Kirk 1999), which set targets for class sizes. The university students I have surveyed, however, think differently and, moreover, faculty projections hardly ever seem to have met realities of ill-limited enrollment. The Administrative Studies faculty has had difficulty administering entrance procedures so as to ensure that matriculation did not exceed projections, and has consistently allowed more than 25 students to enroll in English classes rather than opening additional sections to achieve small class-size targets. Though special 'repeaters' sections have been opened in recent years, upon approval of special requests each year for additional instructors from off campus, such extraordinary measures have had at best a limited effect on class sizes ballooned by

¹ That was the status quo at Kumamoto Women's University (forerunner to the Prefectural University of Kumamoto) in small departments which matriculated 40 to 50 students at a time and then subdivided cohorts into two sections for English instruction by native speakers of English. That also was the par set six years ago when the Administrative Studies faculty, recently approved by the Ministry of Education, came on-line, matriculated approximately 300 students, and then assigned them to a dozen English A class sections of approximately 25 students each. Since then the bubble in this faculty has burst. With admission approved from pools of 'successful' test takers, padded to assure at least target enrollment, in some years cohorts of well over three hundred students have matriculated into the Administrative Studies faculty. Meanwhile, a variable percentage of matriculated students have withdrawn from school and returned later, or failed English courses and needed to retake them. This has generated a growing pool of matriculated students, to which instructors may wish to add non-traditional students (auditors) who want to participate in ever popular language courses that have been open to the community at large. Due to administrative and curricular upheavals late in 1998, however, English classes for 1999-2000 were neither assigned to teachers nor scheduled in time to include them in the Open University program (Dec. 1998). As of March 15, 1999, the schedule of English classes was still indefinite. Thus no English courses were open to auditors for the first semester of the 1999-2000 academic year.

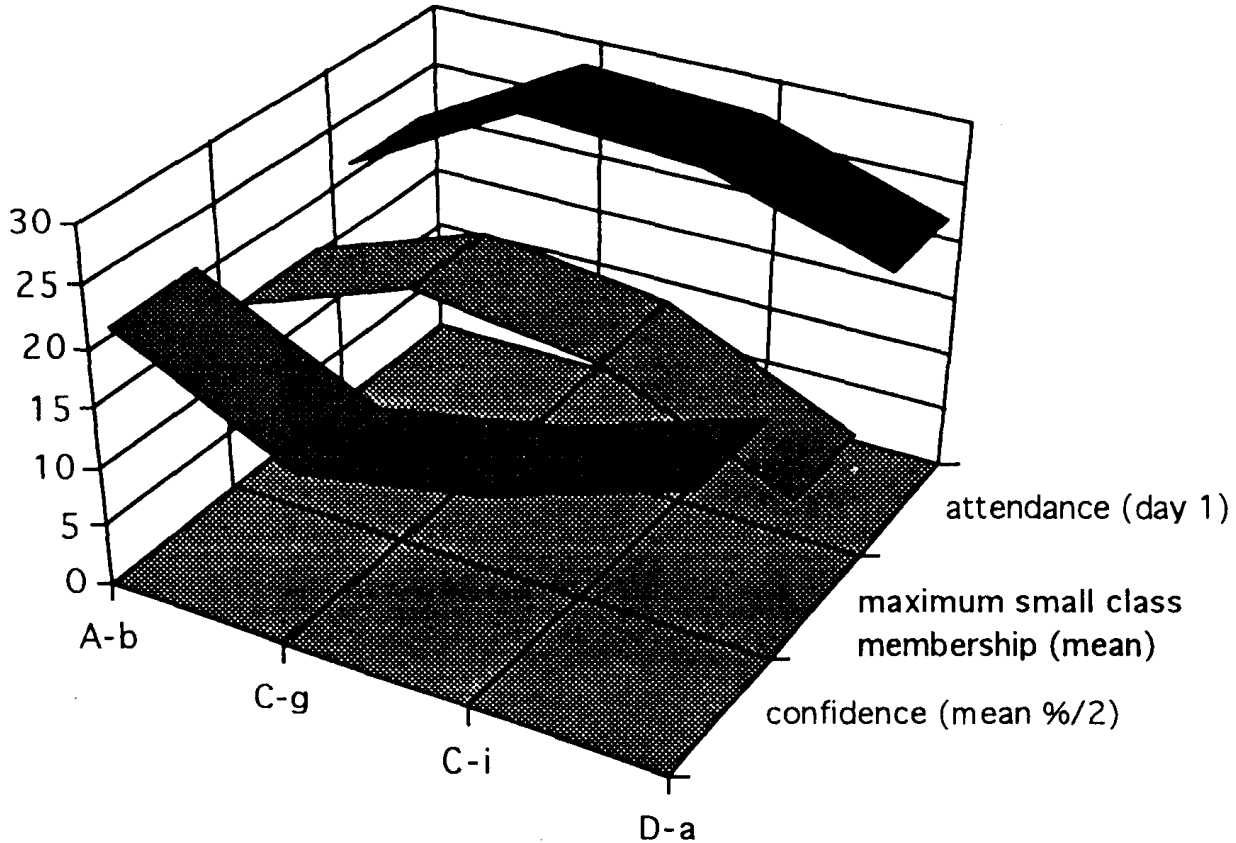
matriculation above projections and swelled by students who have failed to complete or pass required English courses as originally scheduled.

Students' responses to the first 'small' class-size survey in 1998 varied in a consistent manner which seemed to depend upon their current class size. Somewhat shocked by apparent symmetries in the first survey data, and the gap between expectations and reality, I asked student focus groups to provide additional input for interpretations. More shocked by the curricular revision committee's decision to replace not-so-small English classes with even larger ones, for the putative sake of improving foreign language education, I undertook the second survey to gather additional data on student thinking about language class sizes. Before further discussion and interpretations which are understandably tentative, due to the limited scale of the first survey, here are the initial findings.

Initial findings

Students in English A - b and D - a rated themselves as more confident in knowing what 'shouninzuu kyouiku' means than did students in English C (1998 - 99). A's and D's confidence ratings appear as upturns at the ends of the foremost section of the graph in the Figure (below). A - b students' responses are to the left and D - a responses are to the right. (Note that confidence percentages are halved to fit the same scale as maximum small class membership expectations.) Students' expectations appear in the middle ground, and actual attendance on day one of classes appears as the top most 'line' across the Figure.

Students in the two more confident classes, A - b & D - a, reported lower numerical expectations, on average, for the *maximum* number of

Figure: Confidence, expectations, and attendance

students in 'shouninzuu kyouiku' *language classes*. The emphases here reflect those in the original survey (APPENDIX). A - b and D - a students' mean expectations were for maximums of 15.24 and 12.2, respectively, while C - g and C - i students' mean expectations were for maximums of 20.62 and 18.86 students per class (Table 1, below). These maximum small class membership expectations appear as an upturn in the middle 'line' at the center of the graph in the Figure above. Higher maximum small class membership expectations paralleled higher actual attendance figures on day one. (Note that though class rosters included even more students, some did not attend class on day

one of their English courses.) Students in attendance expected that the maximum number of students would be 16.73 (Table 1, mean, right hand column). The average number of students that students expected in 'small' language classes thus was 8.52 people fewer than actually attended on day one (25.25, second column from the right).

Table 1: 'shouninzuu kyouiku' (小人数教育) : First survey results, 1998

English for Admin. Studies April 1998	Heard of... (0=NA, 1=no, 2=yes)	Sure of... (0=NA, 1=no, 2=yes)	Self - confidence rating(%)	Actual class attendance (day one)	Maximum small class membership expectations
A - b	1.86	<u>1.62</u>	<u>41.14</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>15.24</u>
C - g	1.52	1.34	26.2	29	20.62
C - i	1.68	1.32	32	28	18.86
D - a	1.7	<u>1.52</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>12.2</u>
mean	1.69	1.45	35.6	25.25	16.73

Higher proportions of A - b and D - a students reported both having heard of 'shouninzuu kyouiku' and being sure they knew what it meant. Underlined numbers in Table 1 (above) show where students' *higher* confidence in their knowledge of the term 'shouninzuu kyouiku' correlates with *smaller* class membership expectations for language classes as well as with smaller actual class attendance. Bold numbers in the table highlight the difference between actual class attendance and maximum small - class membership expectations.

Initial interpretations

It seems that classes in the Administrative Studies English program are failing to meet students' expectations of 'small' language class sizes. If there is an overall pattern emerging, it is that students expect

fewer class members in 'small' language classes than there are in their current classes. Moreover, students who reportedly are more confident that they know what 'small' classes mean seem to expect even smaller class memberships.

When asked to explain the similarities in confidence and expectations between first year (English A) and more advanced third year (English D) students, English D students said:

English A and English D students are full of drive. They want to study hard. English A students are just beginning their campus life. English D students want to get jobs. (combined statements gathered from focus group on May 18, 1998)

Those comments seem to imply that smaller classes enable students to maintain the high confidence and expectations that they have when they enter the PUK, and to achieve their occupational goals when they graduate. However, this does not seem to apply in the experience of intermediate (English C) students, who for two (or more) years have grown accustomed to classes in which 'small' class expectations have not been met. The impact of larger classes on their levels of confidence appears quite negative; English C students' mean levels of confidence were from 9.14 to 14.94% lower than that of English A students in this small scale survey.

Why do confidence levels of English D students and their expectations of smaller classes seem unaffected by the same experience that both English C and English D students have had in larger than expected classes? Student autonomy and high goals are two factors that students in a focus group mentioned. When asked to explain the differences in confidence and expectations between themselves (English D

students) and their nearest peers in the survey (English C students), English D students said: “We decided ourselves [to enroll in English D instead of English C], so we hope we could get more high level English skills.”

Secondary findings

The second iteration of the class-size survey occurred early in the 1999-2000 school year. Once again I surveyed all of the classes that I began to teach: first, second, third year and repeating students; but instead of focusing on findings from more so-called ‘small’ classes (still exceeding targets of 20 to 25 students) perhaps it would be appropriate to focus first upon the findings from surveys of students enrolled in the first-ever ‘regular’ size English classes offered in the Faculty of Administrative Studies. In only one of these two ‘regular’ sized classes surveyed did actual attendance on the day of the survey meet guidelines calling for 40 students per class (Table 2).

Two ‘regular’ sized classes surveyed

Two colleagues graciously accepted my request to survey the first year, ‘regular’ sized English classes that they began to teach in April, 1999. Numerical results appear in Table 2 (below). First of all, the results of this part of the second survey seem to confirm that students who are more confident that they know what ‘small’ classes mean expect smaller ‘small’ class sizes than their peers who are less confident (data from additional, so-called ‘small’ first year classes remains to be analyzed). These results also reflect the previous survey finding that if a class actually is smaller, students report higher confidence (albeit on a rudimentary measure of confidence).

Table 2: Second survey results - two 'regular' sized classes, 1999

English for Admin. Studies 1999	Heard of... (0=NA, 1=no, 2=yes)	Sure of... (0=NA, 1=no, 2=yes)	Self - confidence rating(%)	Actual class attendance (day of survey)	Maximum small class membership expectations
IIIx	1.72	1.49	<u>47.52</u>	37	<u>13.89</u>
IIIy	1.66	1.66	38.34	41	15.68
mean	1.69	1.575	42.93	39	14.485

In the 'regular' sized classes (English III, x-y, target 40 students), where the mean for actual attendance was just within target, it is striking that the reportedly more confident group of students, in the smaller of the two classes, held lower maximum 'small' class-size expectations on average (underlined in Table 2, above) than did the reportedly less confident students in the larger of the two classes. This holds even though the mean of students in this sample who have heard of 'small' classes is the same as in 1998 (1.69 on a scale of 2).

What is more striking is that first year students' confidence in their knowledge of what 'small' classes are seems to be increasing, at the same time that their expectations of maximum 'small' class size seem to be decreasing (bold in Table 2, above). Confidence is up from 35.6 (1998 mean) to 42.93, and maximum 'small' class-size expectations are down from 16.73 (1998 mean) to 14.485, in spite of the fact that actual class sizes are up.

Three other 'small' sized classes surveyed

Three first-year classes that I teach also responded to the survey in 1999. English I-a and I-e are two of 12 so-called 'small' language classes for first-year students offered first semester. These two classes

fail to meet faculty targets of 20 to 25 students for 'small' classes, because 27 students are enrolled in each. The other class listed in Table 3 (below), English A - 1, which is a special section for students required to repeat previous first-year courses, fails to meet targets, too. 29 students are enrolled in English A - 1 (May 12, 1999).

The data from these three classes (Table 3, below) seems to contradict two hypotheses formed after examining the results of the first survey, namely that:

- a. the smaller the actual class size, the smaller the maximum 'small' class size students expect; and
- b. the more confident the class (in knowing what 'shouninzuu kyouiku' means), the smaller the maximum 'small' class size students expect.

Table 3: Second survey results - three more 'small' sized classes, 1999

English for Admin. Studies 1999	Heard of... (0=NA, 1=no, 2=yes)	Sure of... (0=NA, 1=no, 2=yes)	Self - confidence rating(%)	Actual class attendance (day of survey)	Maximum small class membership expectations
I - e	1.296	1.444	21.739	27	16.148
I - a	1.407	1.444	52.818	27	17.333
A - 1	1.632	1.722	58.647	19	18.166
mean	1.445	1.537	44.401	24.333	17.216

The smallest (in actual attendance), reportedly best informed and most confident class among these three is A - 1, which consists of second, third & fourth year (or older) students who are repeating required first-year English courses. The mean expectation of maximum 'small' class membership for the latter group is marginally higher than for the other two, in spite of higher reported confidence in knowing

what 'shouninzuu kyouiku' means.

The A - 1 class's deviation from earlier trends suggests that experience in so-called 'small' university language classes, which have not met students' expectations, may have an influence on their expectations of maximum 'small' language class size. An experience factor may have as much influence of students' class-size expectations as the narrow measure of confidence assessed in this survey, if not more. The experience factor, which is not directly assessed in this survey, might help to explain why last year's (1998 - 1999) English C class expectations of maximum 'small' language class sizes were higher, but still might not account for last year's English D expectations of maximum 'small' class sizes being lower (Initial interpretations, above).

Another distinction to be drawn regarding the A - 1 class is that, of all the classes surveyed (for which data has been compiled so far), it is the closest to meeting students' maximum class-size expectations of a 'small' language class. In English A - 1 (April 22, 1999) there were 19 students; the mean expectation of 'small' class membership was 18.166, just one student less than actual class attendance on the day of the survey. However, A - 1 is the only one of three first-year English courses I teach which might meet faculty targets of 20 to 25 students in a 'small' language class. It would only if class enrollment were not ten students greater than attendance was on the day of the survey.

Implications

In order to maintain confidence and promote language development for all students even those in the 'sandwich' classes, English B and English C, smaller classes may be needed. Evidence from the first survey suggested that the number of students per class should be from 5.76 to 10.8

students fewer than attended initial English classes for the 1998-99 academic year, simply to meet students' expectations. That would lead to an average of 16.73 students, down from the 25.25 who attended the classes surveyed on day one (Table 1, 1998).

To put the number 16.73 in perspective, let me share a voice of experience from outside the university. The following quote comes from a language instructor and teacher educator at a national university in Japan, someone who has worked for years in Japan and untold more years elsewhere in the world, someone who is no stranger to classroom dynamics or learner outcomes:

Anything below 25 in a university setting? There's point for the teacher where a class becomes anonymous simply through numbers involved. For me this is somewhere between 12 and 24. Beyond 24, the class dynamic and methodology changes, [as do] roles etc.. Lower than 12, I find my role changes as I need to be much more directive and interactive with all members of the group. (electronic communication, May 26, 1998)

Is it any surprise that students' expectations of 'small' sized language classes:

- 14.485 mean from two 'regular' sized classes, 1999 (Table 2),
- 16.73 mean from four 'small' sized classes, 1998 (Table 1),
- 17.216 mean from three more 'small' classes, 1999 (Table 3);

coincide with the class-size range in which students become anonymous even for an experienced instructor and teacher educator? In the experienced language teacher educator's view, students in classes of 25, 30, and up not only may become anonymous entities, but their weight in numbers surpasses a methodological threshold as well. High levels of interaction with all of the students can realistically be expected only in classes smaller than 12.

For a final illustration of student thinking about small classes, I will quote an English D journal entry, then report on the follow - up inquiry in a focus group. On April 26, 1998, student 'Jane Doe' wrote: "...teacher at first asked us about small class. As to the number of persons I thought it was about five people. In test, I wrote fifteen people." In the focus group on May 18, 1998, 'Jane' explained that she had not concealed her thinking in her response to the survey. Instead she had conceived of her answer one step at a time: first of an *ideal* - five students, then of the *maximum* - 15 students in a small language class. Yet the official rosters for her class, one of the smallest English classes in the faculty at the time, included 22 matriculated students and two auditors.

The surveys summarized in this report leave little doubt that English courses offered in the Administrative Studies faculty are failing to meet students' 'small' language class class - size expectations.² Data from the first survey in 1998 suggested that larger classes defeated students' confidence or lowered their expectations of actually having small classes. Such diminished confidence and expectations could have a negative influence of students' classroom behavior and their subsequent language development. In order to find out whether that is the case, it may be necessary to investigate students' expectations of language development in classes of the sizes (with 40 or more students enrolled, excluding auditors) that their English classes have become.

² The so - called 'small' sized classes also may not meet English instructors' class - size expectations, which is another reason (see: Note 1, above) why auditors may not be admitted to English classes in the Administrative Studies faculty during the 1999 - 2000 academic year. Failure to meet both students' and instructors' class - size expectations, year in and year out, could have detrimental impacts on auditors hoping to participate in Open University language courses.

Now, with nearly 50 percent of the data from the second class-size survey analyzed (June 29, 1999), the hypothesis that student confidence regarding knowledge of 'small' classes correlates to actual class sizes must be abandoned, perhaps in favor of a hypothesis that confidence on this rudimentary measure increases over time - or with explicit discussion of the class-size issue. (Second and third-year class results for 1999, plus comments from students - especially from the 18 of 19 English A-1 students who wrote comments - await analysis and interpretation.) Analyzed data from the second class-size survey also has contradicted the hypothesis that the higher the students' confidence, on that rudimentary measure of confidence, the lower the maximum number of students they expect in a 'small' language class. Experience in larger classes than students expect could turn out to be more influential than rudimentary confidence. In order to find out whether that is the case, it may be necessary to investigate not only students' expectations, but also how classroom experience might influence those expectations, or how experience above and beyond expectations interacts with other measures of student confidence.

None of the class-size survey result compiled to data suggest that Administrative Studies Faculty targets for 'small' sized foreign language classes (much less actual class enrollments) are in line with general student expectations. So a major questions remains: Do English and other foreign languages matter enough to students, and the faculty as a whole, for the faculty finally to offer small foreign language classes to students who expect even smaller classes than those that were being offered in 1998? If so, it is back to the drawing board for foreign language education; readjustment of class-size targets and

finding effective ways to achieve those targets in actual foreign language classes will be inevitable. It could be an administrator's dream or worst nightmare. Either way, it is students whose language learning opportunities are at risk; it is they who pay for any difference between language course offerings and their language learning expectations, expectations which once ascertained may either be met or not.

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APPENDIX: 小人数教育('shouninzuu kyouiku') SURVEY QUESTIONS

I told my students I was doing classroom research on class size to tap their background knowledge and current thinking about the program they are in. With the English C's and D's, I also told them that we would return to the issue, as the courses proceed, to get their prognoses for language learning under the circumstances.

Following are the survey questions, more or less as I asked them in the C & D classes I teach, though I have tweaked the questions a little from one class to the next. My best guess now is that I will have [initial] survey results compiled and interpreted soon. Anyway, here are the questions:

1. Have you ever heard the expression '小人数教育'? A simple yes or no is fine.
- 2.a. Are you sure you know what '小人数教育' means? Yes or no is fine.
- 2.b. Yes or no, how sure are you? Please give a percentage (for your degree of certainty).

3. What is the maximum number of students that should be in '小人数教育' language classes? Just one number, the maximum, please. ([+ emphasis] on italicized words)

If you do ask a B class to do this survey, do not hesitate to paraphrase the questions as you see fit, because this is classroom research rather than a rigorous scientific inquiry. (There is no need to worry, say, about reliability of alternate forms, at least not for the moment.) For instance, for the D's Monday, question 2.a. was, "Are you confident that you understand what the expression '少人数教育' means?" and 2.b. was "How confident are you in your understanding of the expression '小人数教育'?" The variant questions should still be tapping the same well; [it] could be a dry one.

Implications anyone: Quality of education? Almost automatically (instinctively?) I have adjusted instructional plans in the larger (C) classes: more explicit, more routine - to turn a phrase: 'recreative routinization;' less initiation (or waiting for it) from the students.

Though the impact on students, their engagement and learning satisfaction, remains to be seen, one observation I have made is that students who want to transfer into a particular class are not concerned about how big it will become or how the students already there will fare - as long as the new class suits their own schedules! To close on a brighter note, two of three auditors in the largest class I teach have seen the light; they agreed to transfer to a smaller one.

(Source of APPENDIX: Paul A. Beaufait, electronic correspondence; April 22, 1998)