

An Overview of Some Studies on Challenges and Strategies for Teaching Mixed-ability Classes

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Abstract

A class is termed mixed-ability when it comprises of learners with divergent levels of language proficiency, learning styles, interest and motivation. Numerous researches have been conducted in the domain of teaching English as a foreign or second language when teaching in mixed-ability classes. The current study aimed to review the literature and outcomes of some studies about the challenges that instructors encounter in dealing with heterogeneous classes and the efficient strategies that assist them to handle these obstacles. Accordingly, the findings indicate that there are challenges which can be related to the management of the crowded classes , materials adaptation and catering for the individual needs, whereas, strategies such as: providing clear instructions, varying the pace and level of activities and grouping low-proficiency learner with high-proficiency learner together cooperatively would result in more successful teaching and learning. This study recommended setting up workshops and seminars to update teachers' strategies, approaches and enhance their levels of expertise. Besides, conducting other experimental studies in order to get more beneficial strategies for coping with the mixed-ability classroom.

Keywords: reviewed studies 1, mixed-ability classes 2, challenges 3, strategies 4

Introduction

A great number of researchers and practitioners have carried out studies focusing on the difficulties and challenges facing them when dealing with mixed-ability classes. They are also searching for the most effective successful strategies to enhance the teaching and learning environment. The current paper reviews literature of six studies on managing mixed ability EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL (English as a second language) classrooms. However, before introducing the review of these studies, the writer will first present the terms and expressions that have been frequently utilized by the pedagogical experts in this field. These consist of the definitions of what mixed-ability class is, challenges facing teachers in mixed-ability classes, advantages of having multi levels classroom and the effective techniques for dealing with the difficulties that arise while teaching such classes. This study is supposed to shed light on the following issues:

a- expanding readers and practitioners concepts of mixed ability classes

b-reviewing some empirical studies to investigate the challenges and problems that face instructors when managing mixed-ability classes

c- highlighting efficient strategies and techniques for dealing with the heterogeneity in teaching English as foreign or second language settings

Review of Literature

Mixed ability classes refer to the groups that consist of learners with different language proficiency levels. These classes are also termed heterogeneous groups, or heterogeneous classes. Since there are no two students who are totally identical in their language abilities, interest, needs or learning styles, all the teaching and learning settings are in reality regarded heterogeneous. In sequence, such classes are often found to provide great challenges and problems for both the teacher and the learners. Difficulties in these large heterogeneous classes may also come due to different factors such as the various previous chances for learning, worse or better previous teaching methods and materials, motivation and interest (Richards & Schmidt: 2002; Ur: 1991). Such heterogeneity is also referred to as multi-level class, indicated Willis (2018).

Practitioners and instructors should generally recognize that when managing such settings, the class is a mixed ability one since learners can develop at different stages of learning and have various strengths, weaknesses and preferences for learning, and when displaying their work. Learners' achievements largely depend on the material being studied and the utilized learning styles. All classes to a less or greater degree are supposed to be mixed ability classes as explained by Bremner (2008).

Numerous challenges are facing teachers in mixed ability Classes. Since learners vary in their abilities and styles of learning the language, interest, motivation and needs, various teaching and learning obstacles have been noted within the large heterogeneous classes as stated by Ur (1991) and Walters (2017). In this article, the investigator has summed up these problems into four categories in accordance with her quite long experience in teaching EFL and ESP classes as follow: discipline and effective learning for all students, materials adaptation, individual awareness and correcting written assignments.

Discipline is a noticeable problem which is closely related to classroom management. It can be difficult for a teacher to control a mixed ability class when learners get frustrated or lose concentration. This problem occurs when the high level achievers feel the learning material is too easy and boring while the low achievers may find this material very difficult to follow and become frustrated. In sequence, such situations cannot ensure effective learning for all learners. Also, the advanced students may dominate classroom participations whereas the less advanced ones stay passively.

Materials- as textbooks are often designed for a particular type of learners, tasks and contents may not be suitable for students with different learning levels. In most cases, such books are either rigid and not flexible or they need a sort of adaptation in order to meet the needs of the individuals and involve all the students in class.

Individual awareness- the classes are large and heterogeneous, hence it is often a challenge for the instructor to follow up the progress of each of the students individually and provide correction in class. Teachers may find themselves spending much more time with the advanced learners instead of assisting the less advanced ones.

Correcting the written work- it is a great worry for teachers to mark the tasks and activities and deal with all errors made by students.

Although mixed-ability classes are regarded problematic by practitioners and experts, various other benefits are indicated by researchers among them is Ur (1991). These includes-

- A large heterogeneous class provides a rich human resource as the learners come up with different knowledge, interest, ideas and styles; and these all develop class interactions and achievements
- Learners can constitute social relations and develop cultures as they know each other values and personality
- The fact that teachers may not devote attention and time equally to all the individuals in class, students can teach their peers and learn from each other collaboratively
- Mixed ability classes can be seen as providing a great opportunity for professional development. Teachers have to supplement and adapt the materials, and then find the best methods to motivate students

Many of the experts and teachers are constantly occupied by looking for the best strategies and techniques that would be fruitful in enhancing the teaching and learning environment of the mixed ability classroom. Bremner (2008) and Ur (1991) outline some useful strategies for coping with the problems and challenges that arise in mixed ability classes, such problems as those which are mentioned in an earlier paragraph of this research. Accordingly, these successful strategies can be summed up in two ways: first- on the part of the learners- teach students to be effective learners by thinking about their learning, be resourceful, be organized and pacing their time; second- on the part of the teacher- meet the individual needs of students- vary your methods, activity and materials, use compulsory plus optional strategy, use open-ended tasks and group learners cooperatively. All these points are elaborated as follows:

- inform learners about the various learning styles and strategies. Direct students to think for themselves and encourage them to work out meanings utilizing their prior knowledge of the target foreign language. Students like the opportunity to be creative as their

suggestions, ideas and experiences provide variety to the class and add interest. Also, teach learners to be resourceful and where to get help if they need as in using e.g. a glossary or a dictionary. Beside, encourage students to be organized and review the previous knowledge before starting class to consolidate learning. Added to that, students should learn about pacing and setting time limits in their activities for maximum learning potential. Learners like to know the available time for a certain amount of work.

- Teachers should use different methods, strategies, topics and activity to avoid boredom and discipline problems. Materials sometimes need to be adapted and supplemented in order to capture all learners' interest and motivation; and the goals of the lesson should be clearly set up and assessed to see whether learners have attained the goals at the end of the class. Also, the use of open-ended tasks that have more than one possible reply and the compulsory plus optional strategies which allow students to choose their preferred activities are effective and useful. Finally, cooperative groups are very interesting which allow all students to achieve their work using their preferred learning techniques while creating social relations. Within such groups every learner has a certain part of work to complete. Each group should include weak and strong students. All the group members have to participate to accomplish the task bringing the different pieces of work together. These groups are also beneficial in correcting the written assignments when indicating to students how to correct and improve collaboratively each other work. This allows the teacher to wander around the classes and to be as a facilitator.

Typically, Hans & Hans (2017) provided useful strategies to appropriately enhance the levels of cooperation. First, instructors can provide clear and flexible learning goals at the beginning of each unit, give students choices and accommodate their interest. Secondly, show personal interest to all students in class, as each student appreciates personal attention or encouragement from the teacher. Finally, teachers positively interact with all students in class by freely moving and making an eye contact when speaking and giving time for students participation.

To obtain comprehensive and beneficial background knowledge and information for this current research, the writer has reviewed six studies about the challenges and strategies of mixed-ability classes. These imply Huang (2014); Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi (2015); Al-Subaiei (2017); Rahman (2018), Naddafi et al (2019) and Syathroh et al (2019).

Huang (2014) has carried out a study at primary schools in Taiwan to investigate English language teachers opinions about teaching mixed ability classes. A questionnaire was distributed among about sixty experienced teachers to obtain the required data. The researcher has found the majority of the subjects believe that the most essential pedagogical objective was to stimulate learners' interest and motivate them to learn English language. Also, most of the informants have indicated that mixed ability teaching approach can guide and assist students to learn more effectively. On the contrary, half of the teachers have found it difficult to cater for the various

individual needs. The study concluded that teachers have to vary in their strategies and make important changes in their classroom techniques in order to improve the learning and teaching settings.

Another research was conducted by Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi (2015). They investigated the obstacles encountered by Omani EFL teachers of level five mixed-ability classes and the employed strategies for dealing with these challenges. A questionnaire was adopted for data collection which consisted of two types of questions: multiple choice and open-ended. The tested items were: classroom management, teaching methods, learners' motivation, learners' needs and adapting materials. The findings showed that problems in multi-level classes face both male and female teachers. However, there were no significant differences between teachers in dealing with challenges or coping with strategies. Besides, teachers have applied a limited number of strategies recorded at moderate to low levels for improving these heterogeneous settings. The authors recommended teachers should teach students about the efficient techniques for enhancing their academic levels and be active learners. In addition, teachers have to update their knowledge and approaches about managing mixed-ability classes.

According to Al-Subaiei's (2017) problems of teaching and learning English language recorded at a high degree in mixed ability classes. This study was undertaken in Saudi contexts in an English language institute through which an online questionnaire was oriented to the university lecturers. The results of the study, also, indicated that strategies such as classroom management and differentiation were considered to be the most effective regardless of teachers' level of experience. In line with this, instructors who have positive opinions towards the heterogeneity of multi-level classes are more successful when teaching and involving all learners in class.

Rahman (2018) has conducted a research to explore the challenges and the possible solutions when conducting EFL mixed-ability classes in Bangladesh. The primary data were gathered through a questionnaire survey and an interview with the instructors at higher secondary level colleges. The study findings have revealed that teachers face difficulties in classroom management, materials adaptation or adjustment and motivating students. However, the education strategies which are supposed to assist in bridging the obstacles in focus were not properly employed. The paper recommended program for English teachers training and workshops have to be set up for highlighting and emphasizing the various techniques of coping with these multi-level classes.

During the year 2019 two studies were done to inspect the issues and concerns of heterogeneous classes. Naddafi et al have dealt with this topic in the contexts of Iranian high schools. Data was gathered via an open-ended questionnaire distributed to the English language teachers and experts. The findings of the study pointed out that the teachers can overcome the problems which they face in teaching multi-level classes by adopting the strategies indicated by the

specialists. In addition to that, teachers' concerns about mixed ability classes were not consistent and they vary in their attitudes towards applying the heterogeneous classroom strategies.

The second research in the same year 2019 has been carried out by Syathroh et al to explore the Indonesian teachers' methods of teaching English language in mixed ability classrooms. They utilized a questionnaire and the results indicated that the majority of the lecturers admitted teaching English in heterogeneous classes has benefits as well as problems. In other words, it is beneficial when such classes provide a greater chance for creativity and profession development as teachers adopt problem solving techniques to face the difficulties they encounter. On the other hand, there are obstacles such as classroom control, stimulating students interest, correcting errors and adapting appropriate materials.

The current research is in line with these above mentioned investigations' trends and concerns. That is to say, they all have been focused on the difficulties which they come across when teaching in the heterogeneous language classrooms, and then, they have introduced successful strategies for minimizing these challenges benefiting from the advance of the global issues to enhance the level of instructors pedagogical expertise.

Methodology

In this research, the writer has utilized qualitative methodological study design. Then, data were gathered from online database resources: references and journals. The upcoming points present the methodological approaches which were followed by researchers in dealing with problems of mixed classes and the strategies for improving the classroom settings.

The sample is comprised of six EFL and ESL educational researches, which were selected purposefully and according to the available resources during the academic year 2020. Some authors stated directly that they were conducting EFL studies such as Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi (2015); Al-Subaiei (2017); Naddafi et al (2019) and Syathroh et al (2019). However, the two other researchers did not mention, in a way or another, whether their population and sampling EFL or ES, their references only to teaching English, namely Huang (2014) and Rahman (2018).

Throughout the reviewed literature of these studies, the writer has found that the reviewed papers have tackled the topic in focus, i.e. , managing mixed-ability classes, to some extent, from the same dimensions and orientations. For instance, teachers attitudes and opinions towards teaching heterogeneous language classroom with the effective strategies to overcome the difficulties are indicated in Huang (2014); Syathroh et al (2019) and Naddafi et al(2019). In line with these authors, Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi (2015); Al-Subaiei(2017) and Rahman(2018) have focused on the challenges which have been experienced by English language instructors in mixed ability classes and the probable solutions.

The most highly frequency challenges that have been encountered by the informants of the reviewed studies can be summed up in classroom management and large class size, motivation as in catering for the individual needs and materials adaptation. On the other hand, the strategies which are utilized to provide the sought improvements are generally presented in: providing clear instructions, varying the pace and level of instructions, presenting diverse methods, materials and techniques; grouping weak and strong learners together cooperatively, seeking help from the high-proficiency students and helping the low-proficiency learners individually.

Concerning the research designs, the researcher has seen that in the reviewed studies three authors have adopted quantitative methodological design in which data were gathered via close ended questionnaires such as Huang (2014); Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi (2015) and Al-Subaiei (2017). Two other writers have followed qualitative study design as Syathroh et al (2019) and Naddafi et al (2019) using open ended questionnaires. The last writer Rahman (2018) has stated utilizing a mix method paradigm questionnaire survey and interview.

With reference to the reviewed studies' population and sampling, it is apparently indicated that three investigations were undertaken at university level, namely, Rahman(2018); Al-Subaiei (2015) and Syathroh et al (2019). In addition, two studies were conducted at primary and basic levels schools, whilst, the sixth research was carried out at public high schools.

Findings

The study in focus is theoretical in nature, hence, its findings have broadly been taken out from the results of the aforementioned six reviewed researches, taking an account into what have been provided by the first pedagogical specialized experts in this domain. They all (practitioners-researchers and experts) agree that mixed-ability classes have obstacles such as discipline and controlling classes, providing equal opportunities and effective learning for all students, adapting teaching materials, individual awareness and following up the progress of each learner, and correcting the written assignments. Nonetheless, efficient strategies have been introduced by those researchers to improve the heterogeneous language classroom settings, and which can be summed up in two dimensions. First- on the part of the learners- teach students to be effective learners by thinking about their learning, be resourceful, be organized and pacing their time. Second- on the part of the teacher- meet the individual needs of students- vary your methods, activity and materials, use compulsory plus optional strategy, use open-ended tasks and group learners cooperatively.

Conclusion

It is widely held and well known beliefs among the practitioners and expert of English as a foreign or second language, being aware of the challenges and strategies when teaching the heterogeneous classes would help, to a great extent, in bettering and enhancing the classroom teaching and learning settings. The course of the teaching process worldwide is looking for

introducing and employing the most efficient strategies and approaches that can facilitate the intended teaching achievements and the successful learning outcomes. Hence, the outlined mentioned challenges can largely be accommodated by adopting the potential techniques which have been proposed by the numerous specialists of teaching and learning the English language. However, implementation of such concepts and approaches, definitely, requires in-service training programs (workshops or seminars) to introduce up-to-date strategies, approaches and materials that have become an easy touch within the great advance of globalization and technology.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The following are suggestions for future works:

- To conduct extra experimental studies on the problems and strategies of managing mixed ability classes.
- To carry out a study testing the effectiveness of mixed ability language classroom strategies using questionnaires, interviews and observations- teachers perceptions.
- To set up workshops and seminars to update instructors' strategies, approaches and enhance their levels of expertise

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