



Suggestions to Teach Mixed-Ability EFL Classes at Universities

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Abstract: A mixed-ability Class is one of the challenges faced by EFL teachers. It causes problems in teaching and learning English, namely effective learning for all, materials, participation, interest and discipline. EFL teachers need to employ different strategies and follow practical principles to solve these problems.

Key words: Mixed Ability, Teaching Strategies, EFL Classes

I. Introduction

English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers must cope with different difficulties in teaching English. One of them is mixed ability EFL classes (MAEC) - in other words, students who differ clearly in the level of English are gathered in the same classroom. It is also called heterogeneous classes. MAEC can cause troubles with choosing appropriate materials to mixed-level learners, giving classroom activities that is able to attract most of the students' attention, or giving feasible tests to ensure just a few of them may fail the final test. Those make EFL teachers be under pressure to cover many aspects in MAEC and to provide an efficient English course for all students.

II. Literature review

Ur (2012) shows five crucial problems that might occur in a mixed-ability class including effective learning for all, materials, participation, interest and discipline.

Box 1. Teaching problems in large heterogeneous classes (Ur, 2012)

Effective learning for all. 'I can't make sure they're all learning effectively; the tasks I provide are either too difficult or too easy for many of them.'

Materials. 'The material is unsuitable: the texts and tasks in my coursebook are targeted at students at a particular level, and some of my students need easier or more difficult material.'

Participation. 'I can't activate them all: only a few students – the more proficient and confident ones – seem to respond actively to my questions.'

Interest. 'They get bored: I can't find topics and activities that keep them all interested.'

Discipline. 'I have discipline problems in these classes; I find them difficult to control.'

Effective learning for all

The main role of teachers is to assure that almost students learn effectively. Teachers must take immediate actions if a part of them effectively have a limited acquisition. Theoretically, different tasks appropriate to the varying abilities of the students are the best solution. However, it is not very practical in the real EFL classes and it is a huge burden for teachers to differentiate tasks for a number of individuals.

Materials

Majority of English textbooks are designed for teachers to teach students with a particular level of English. Most of the content cannot be adaptable to different levels of learners.

Participation

To have a full participation of students in heterogeneous classes is a challenge faced by many teachers. There is predominance of the more advanced students in answering teachers' questions, correcting others' works, performing classroom activities. While, the weaker students are always humble or even silent when they are required to answer an easy question. They are willing to be led by the more advanced ones in group works.

Interest

Either too easy or too difficult tasks generate the boredom of students in learning English. With the less able students, difficult tasks are impossible for them to complete. They easily ignore the tasks and leave them to the more advanced students. In the same way, the higher-level students find easy tasks useless and meaningless to accomplish.

Discipline

The above boredom is a primary source of discipline problems in MAEC. Teachers may find students in MAEC is not easy to control due to different opinions of students towards the learning process or tasks given. Some of them might think they are taught what they know in the past. While others find it completely new to them. Moreover, weaker students may make some disturbance in classroom because they need more explanations of the task requirement from teachers or their classmates.

III. Previous studies

Several attempts have been made to investigate teaching strategies in mixed ability English classes (Syathroh, Musthafa & Purnawarman, 2019; Gustiani, 2019; Anggraini 2022). There is consistency of the findings from these studies. Most participants admitted that they employed different strategies to deal with problems in MAEC.

An investigation by Syathroh, Musthafa & Purnawarman (2019) has shown that majority of teachers have already employed the strategies suggested by the experts. Although they varied their teaching (materials, method, techniques, and more) and implemented various techniques of grouping students (whole class, individual, pair work, homogeneous grouping and heterogeneous grouping), most of them still have faced some problems in classrooms, especially about certain aspects related to the classroom management including controlling students' discipline, maintaining students' interests, conducting effective learning for all students, error correction, selecting and presenting classroom instructions. In line with the previous research, Gustiani (2019) found that the participants applied a variety of interesting teaching and learning strategies to deliver their materials. They had different instructional materials to meet the different needs of their students. A recent research by Anggraini (2022) involved EFL Teachers Teach Heterogeneous Classroom also found that teachers diversified their teaching strategies in heterogenous classes. They gave extra material and additional task to maintain concentration of strong students. To strengthen the cooperation between stronger and weaker students, teachers gave more enjoyable activities, made contract a contract of language learning with the uncooperative students, engaged strong students to help weak ones.

In brief, there are no certain strategies that can solve all problems of MAEC. Teachers need to be flexible in using teaching strategies.

IV. Suggestions to teach Mixed-Ability EFL Classes at Universities

Ur (2012) points out practical principles to teach a mixed-ability EFL class including variation, interest, individualization, personalization, collaboration, open-ending, compulsory plus optional. These principles are helpful in many ways although they can solve all problems in MAEC. Level and pace, type of classroom organization, skill, topic, and task are aspects that teacher can vary.

It is widely agreed that tasks need to be differentiated in MAEC. It helps all students receive appropriate tasks. Furthermore, giving good tasks are able to increase students' interests much more than changing topics. Sabina (2020) suggested some ways teacher can do to vary tasks.

Table 1. Differentiating tasks (Sabina, 2020)

Strong students	Weak students
Filling in gaps in sentences	Perform a multiple choice task
Make sentence transformation	Make word ordering
Free writing	Modeled writing
Persuasive writing	Informative writing
Describing pictures	Pictures accompanied by a wordlist
Spelling words	Filling missing letters
Guessing the word according to its transcription	Matching the word to its transcription
Writing a letter	Filling missing words into a letter
Unprepared speaking	Prepared speaking

With strong students, they are more motivating to do more challenging tasks. They should be give tasks with less boundaries or limitations in performing the tasks. While tasks that are not required creativity easily engage weak students.

Both strong and weak students tend to be eager to participate in fun, dramatic, and competitive activities. Language games or competitions are powerful tools that teachers can make use to arouse students' interest and increase their participation. Luspa (2018) stated that because of allowing flexibility, language games can be helpful in solving problems in a class with many proficiency levels. According to Yaccob and Yunus (2019), language games are divided into two types, namely digital game and non-digital language game. Games can be created easily and vividly on platforms such as quizzes, baambooblze, kahoot, tubequizard and more. However, a proper internet connection should be guaranteed to ensure that all students can participate in the game. While a digital game requires internet connection and digital devices, non-digital games, also called traditional games, do not require those ones. They can be conducted anywhere with less conditions and cost. Some simple traditional games, but extremely effective, namely touch the board, mime, find the pair, crossword, and so on.

V. Conclusion

Teaching an MAEC is a challenge faced by many EFL teachers, especially the less experienced ones. Variation in teaching strategies is the primary key to success in MAEC. Additionally, teachers should follow practical principles to make teaching and learning more efficient. In fact, MAEC may not only bring disadvantages but also advantages to EFL teachers if teachers make use of MAEC.

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