LANGUAGE ISSUES; MIXED ABILITY CLASSES IN SAUDI PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract:

The diversity between students in language classes is a common situation that any language teacher faces. Mixed-ability language classes are universal, and many factors contribute to this phenomenon. the main factor is the existed variations in students' levels of intelligence, language proficiency or aptitude. This study will examine mixed-ability classes or heterogeneous classes by first providing their definitions, discuss the challenges that English teachers may confront as a result of differing students' abilities and responses toward the lessons, and present the advantages of mixed-ability classes, with some strategies to enhance the learning process. The study revealed that Saudi Arabia is one of the main interested states in teaching the English language starting in primary schools. The results of the study also clarified that big cities in Saudi Arabia are home to people from different countries and with different cultural backgrounds. Consequently, this diversity has resulted in schools with students who have different characteristics, or mixed-ability classes.

Keywords: language teacher, language classes, mixed-ability classes, Saudi Arabia.

Introduction:

Language teachers are always seeking to deliver their lesson in the best ways possible and to ensure that such information is provided to students equally.

Therefore, effective language teachers are always trying to find the most creative and practical methods or approaches to teach their students. Unfortunately, some issues may arise and consequently prevent language teachers from providing the necessary content to all students. In this regard, every language teacher needs to be aware of these issues. In this module, a number of the most frequent issues that English language teachers face are presented, and heterogeneous classes is one of these problems discussed in the course. This essay will examine mixed-ability classes or heterogeneous classes by first providing their definitions. Second, I will discuss the challenges that English teachers may confront as a result of differing students' abilities and responses toward the lessons. I will also present the advantages of mixed-ability classes, with some strategies to enhance the learning process, such as the differentiation approach. Finally, I will analyse this issue in my context and how it could be solved based on what I have read in this module.

Mixed-Ability Classes

The diversity between students in language classes is a common situation that any language teacher faces. This diversity is not only a matter of language proficiency but also includes the truthfulness of the students' responses to their teachers, the variety of intelligence levels and, sometimes, differences in the native language, the cultural background and even the motivation to learn. Some educators refer to these classes as mixed-ability classes or heterogeneous classes, a term used to define classes having students with different levels of language proficiency (Bremner, 2008). Gordon (2010) defines mixed-ability classes as having students in the same grade and with a similar background but who have different abilities in the subject area. McKeown (2004), as cited in Bremner (2008), believes that many teachers think a mixed-ability class is one involving a group of average and able pupils mixed with others who have learning difficulties.

However, according to Ur (1991), the term could be considered misleading, as every class or large numbers of classes are, at some point, made up of learners who differ in various ways; some students develop knowledge faster than others, so a homogenous-ability class does not exist, and every class is considered heterogeneous. Mixed- ability classes are seen as a global phenomenon. Particularly in primary schools, students are arranged in classes based on their age and year of study. They are grouped randomly, regardless of their achievement and level of ability (Lyle, 1999; Bremner, 2008), thus easily creating a mixed-ability class. What is important for any language teacher is to distinguish between mixed-ability classes and mixed-ability teaching, as many teachers work with mixed-ability classes but do not use any specific strategies to teach these classes (Bremner, 2008).

Where are mixed-ability classes found and why?

Mixed-ability language classes are universal, and many factors contribute to this phenomenon .the main factor is the existed variations in students' levels of intelligence, language proficiency or aptitude. These factors vary from one student to another according to one's personal interests or motivation to teach the subject, differences in cultural background (some learners are more willing than others to learn a second language) and greater familiarity with the culture associated with the second language. Some Educators believe that different learning styles affect the learning process (Tomlinson, 2003). Some students are visual learners, others are auditory learners, and some learn via kinaesthetics. These views are controversial. According to Husmann & O'Loughlin (2018), the idea of different learning styles and categorising students into three or more learning styles, such as, for instance, visual or auditory, should be rejected by both educators and students, as no evidence for this exists yet, this study is recently published and could be argued. Regarding the factors that lead to classes of students with mixed abilities, these are normal and occur in almost every class, and variation is, of course, common to all humans (Ur, 1991).

Figure 1 shows in diagrammatic form the many reasons why learners of the same age in the same classroom differ in their language proficiency levels.
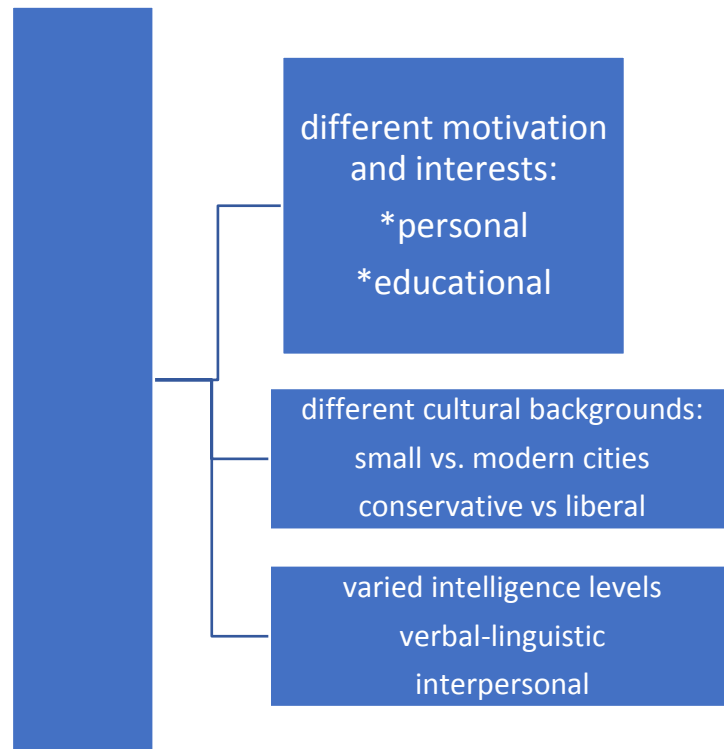

Figure 1. differentiation between students in the same age.

Challenges

As I have already argued in preceding paragraphs, following Valentic (2005), major differences exist in the ability of students to master learning a second language; they may not all have the same reason for wanting to do so, and, as any teacher knows, self-discipline is not a common quality among students. Teachers will find it very challenging to instruct learners when their levels of ability, desire to learn and levels of language required by the syllabus vary widely.

Ur (1991) listed some challenges that language teachers may face in teaching mixed-ability classes:

- Discipline – Teachers may find that mixed-ability classes are chaotic and difficult to manage. When learners feel frustrated and are distracted and bored, discipline is undermined. Heterogeneous classes are more difficult to manage because of the differences in students' grasp of the subject. Those who find it easy want to move on, whereas those who are slower need more of the teacher's help.

- Interest – Students have different learning styles, motivation and interest in the subject. Teachers in mixed-ability classes may find it difficult to teach content and design activities that are motivating and interesting for all learners at the same time.

- Effectiveness of learning – In mixed-ability classes, facilitating effective learning for all learners is difficult. Both content and activity in a lesson may be too easy for some and too difficult for others.

- Materials – Teaching materials are usually designed for a particular kind of learner and may narrow teachers' options or inhibit flexibility.

- Individual awareness – Teachers will have difficulty following the progress of all learners. In classes where wide variations exist, teachers may not able to equally offer time and attention to all (Šimanová, 2010).

- Participation – In widely heterogeneous classes, the faster learners will participate more than the less-advanced or slower ones. Ignoring some and accommodating others may affect learners' progress in the subject.

- Correction – Dealing with learners' mistakes can be frustrating; teachers may feel that they cannot deal with these fully. For example, in a situation in which the teacher wants to encourage students' fluency, he/she does not want to disrupt students' learning process with a correction; at the same time, however, the teacher wants to stop the others from committing the same mistake.

Advantages of Mixed-Ability Classes

These challenges could prevent language teachers from recognising the advantages of mixed-ability classes and encourage them to only see the disadvantages. In fact, mixed-ability classes can be closely related to the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). The students in mixed-ability classes may have had different linguistic experiences, and their competency levels vary for a number of reasons. Some of them may have had private lessons where they had more exposure, whereas some others paid little attention to learning foreign languages because of their social status or previous educational background. When the teacher successfully applies some effective mixed-abilities teaching strategies in the classroom, the good achievers are able to help the weaker ones in mixed groups, where they can discuss problems and exchange knowledge (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

When teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult and unrewarding, it is easy for them to be blind to the potential good in them. But these classes do have some advantages, too (see Ur, 1991). They can be a melting pot of human characteristics. Classes benefit from members who have learned different things, done different things, have different views and are interested in different things, all of which enrich the lessons (Hess, 2001). Teachers with the right frame of mind enjoy teaching in such an environment where the class members share their learning and come up with new ideas (Ur, 1991). In classes like these, students take more responsibility for their own learning, especially as class size makes it less likely that they will get much of individual help from the teacher. The teacher grows, as well, because he/she meets and solves problems that arise and tries out different teaching methods. According to Tomlinson (1999), a good teacher leaves a class at the end of the day, goes home to think about what needs to be done differently and goes back the following day to teach a better lesson.

Strategies

A good teacher in the present circumstances needs a range of knowledge and skills, including deep knowledge of the content of the subject and of teaching, knowledge of how children and adolescents learn in a variety of settings, skills for creating a classroom community that is supportive of learning for diverse students, knowledge about many different ways of assessment and the ability to reflect on practice (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Some educators tend to generate effective approaches and principles that suit all learners irrespective of their differences. An example is the differentiation approach by Carol Tomlinson.

Differentiation Approach

This approach is defined by Tomlinson (2003) as teaching the same subject to all students by using different instructional strategies and delivering the lessons by varying or distinguishing the level of difficulty level based on each student's ability.

Moreover, Trujo (2004) states that, 'differentiating instruction is a matter of presenting the same task in different ways and at different levels, so that all students can approach it in their own ways' . According to Tomlinson, (2003), teachers can differentiate the instruction in four ways. The first is through the content, which refers to what is taught or the materials that are used. The second is through the process or the different methods used by teacher. The third is through the product or what the students have learned from the lesson, and this could be in the form of an oral or written final report from the students. The last one is through the learning environment, and this could be the classroom management techniques or the arrangement that the teacher uses to support the learning process.

It is important to recognise that differentiated instruction is a holistic approach to teaching and not simply a collection of strategies or activities. Effective differentiation requires an ongoing evaluation of students' needs and conscious attention to designing instructional activities and assessment to meet such needs (Tomlinson, 2003).

It is true that teachers must have an extensive repertoire of research-based instructional strategies at hand, but they must also be able to think outside the box to ensure that each student's needs are met.

According to Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010), teachers are successful at differentiating instruction for English language learners when they do the following:

Find out all there is to know about their class members—There will be those who are clever, have good reasoning skills, learn quickly or slowly, have hobbies or pursuits, speak several languages, come from different backgrounds and speak English well or not so well. The teacher needs to have a file on each learner to be able to tailor his/her teaching to any one of the students.

Have high expectations for all students —The teacher should not dilute the syllabus for those who are not at par with the best in class. The teacher must find new ways of familiarising the students with what they need to learn and encourage them to let other class members see and hear the progress they have made.

Can pick from a stock of proven teaching methods—A teacher cannot teach every student in the same way because the class contains a whole raft of students with different preferences and learning capabilities. Good teachers fit their teaching to the different requirements of their class members.

Constantly evaluate each student's performance to tailor the teaching content and method—Students need regular, consistent and personal feedback on how they are doing, and the teacher adjusts the input to what the learners need, as it changes.

Change the way the assessment is given—The teacher does not do it the same way every time; he/she needs to differentiate it for students of varying abilities and learning preferences.

Give a variety of after-school tasks—Handing out the same homework to all class members does not assist in learning. Tailoring tasks to different levels of ability and development will mean that the students all need to work equally hard, but all the efforts will be productive (Tomlinson, 2005).

Other Suggestions

In addition, there are other suggestions to cope with the challenges of mixed- ability classes. For instance, variety and pace are some of the principles suggested by Hess (2001), especially in large classes. According to Hess (2001), language teachers are encouraged to use different kinds of activities and techniques that may suit all learning situations, and to handle these activities at the right *tempo*.

Language teachers need to consider that not all activities will be the same for all students, as every student has an individual technique to finish a certain activity (Hess, 2001). For example, if the teacher asks the students to do a vocabulary lesson, some of them will check the dictionary, whereas others will read the entire sentence in an attempt to understand the meaning from context. Furthermore, any language teacher needs to mind timing; sometimes, if an activity runs too fast, the students would be confused or distracted. On the other hand, the students will feel bored if one activity is too long, as is usually the case for the most active or achieving students (Hess, 2001). Another suggestion mentioned by Hess (2001) is the use of open-ended exercises. In most textbooks, the exercises call for specific answers, or they use close-ended tasks; for example, in fill-in-the-blank tasks, the answer is usually one specific word. Open-ended tasks, on the other hand, will provide more opportunities for the students to participate and be active; examples are allowing them to give their own definition of some words or the teacher giving the students the beginning of the sentence and asking them to finish it correctly. In sum, all these options or suggested principles could provide an effective teaching experience and will offer opportunities to all students to participate and grasp knowledge.

Discussion and Conclusion

About the Context

Saudi Arabia has rich cultural diversity characerised by various traditions, customs or even interests. Big cities in Saudi Arabia are home to people from different countries and with different cultural backgrounds. Consequently, this diversity has resulted in schools with students who have different characteristics, or mixed-ability classes.

Primary schools, for instance, are where children go with their fresh insights and traditions carried over from their homes and where each child has his/her own way of learning; primary schools are therefore a perfect place for mixed- ability classes. Students in primary schools in Saudi Arabia are divided randomly, and the only basis is students' ages. As shown in Figure 1, having students of the same age in the same classrooms does not mean having a homogenous-ability class, as many factors will affect students' language learning ability. For example, those students who live in small cities have different learning prospects than those who live in the big cities, as the former are more likely to be conservatives and, in some cases, less motivated to learn a second language.

Moreover, the students in primary schools in Saudi Arabia study the same content, including that for the English language. This unified content places a burden on language teachers because they have to exert additional effort in designing activities based on the content, thus limiting their options and creativity.

Personal Perspectives

This essay has enhanced my knowledge, as I realised that a number of valuable and practical solutions could be applied in my context to cope with the issue of mixed-ability classes. One of the valuable solutions, which were also mentioned in the previous chapter, is that suggested by Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010)—getting to know the students. This suggestion would be applied in my context; in my opinion, every language teacher needs to introduce the students to one another, as knowing some information about others will enable the students to interact effectively. This could be done by asking the students about their opinions on some current social events or asking them to discuss with their peers about their favorite subjects, which could be done in written form or even through drawings. The more that the teacher knows about his/her students' background, the better prepared he/she can be in his/her lessons. Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010) suggested the differentiation of homework, but this can be difficult to apply in my context, especially in primary schools, as it can be time consuming; instead, the teacher can adapt tasks from textbooks that could be difficult for some students and try to simplify them. For example, in vocabulary tasks involving fill-in-the-blank tasks, the teacher can prepare two forms of this task; with the non-achievers, the teacher could give multiple choices for each blank and place the synonyms for some choices.

In this case, the weaker achievers will receive indirect support to scaffold the correct answers. However, other practical suggestions could be used within the lesson, such as conducting different activities with different techniques. An example is the use of visual aids in some of these activities, as such aids are readily available in mainstream schools, or giving the students other activities in which they need to discuss with one another. All these variations in the activities will develop the learning process and enhance the students' learning. Another strategy that can be used in the lesson is drills, which are an effective way to involve all students Together; non-achievers would not feel embarrassed of making mistakes, and they will learn, for example, new vocabulary or intonation effectively.

One personal example worth mentioning is one of my children's experience with her English teacher. My child is a year six student in primary school and has good knowledge of the English language. The teacher did not label my child as a good achiever, but she decided to give her a task so that she can help other students in her class. In this way, my child felt responsible in helping the other students. The activity was to a short workshop in class on how to learn new vocabulary by using flash cards that the students can make by themselves. The workshop involves drawing, coloring, designing and discussing, which were all conducted under the teacher's supervision. The teacher in this example used cooperative learning among the students, resulting in satisfactory outcomes at the end of the lesson.

From my perspective, I think that teaching heterogeneous classes is all about how language teachers create an effective learning environment that enables social interaction among the students and how the teacher can reduce competition in class so that the students support one another, and each student has an equal opportunity to learn. In sum, the differentiation approach and cooperative learning can both help create a successful and effective learning environment in mixed-ability classes. This takes place when the language teacher has efficiently chosen what is the best approach to apply on the students on the basis of his/her knowledge about the students' educational and cultural background.

Conclusion

Every student comes to class with different ideas and different characteristics, in addition to his/her unique knowledge and learning abilities. Language teachers need to recognise this variation and appropriately deal with it. This essay aims to determine the factors that affect mixed-ability classes, as well as the advantages and challenges associated with teaching such classes. Some effective strategies suggested by educators to cope with this issue have been discussed, as well. Saudi Arabia is interested in teaching the English language starting in primary schools, so elucidating and addressing this issue are relevant.

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