

## **Overcoming the Challenges Faced in a Mixed Ability Classroom**

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**ABSTRACT:** Language classes all over the world consists learners of mixed ability. From elementary level to tertiary level, language teachers face the problem, i.e., teaching mixed ability learners, which hampers the overall process of language learning. This paper attempts to focus on the challenges faced by both teachers and learners in a mixed ability classroom, especially in tertiary level, and throws some light on the reasons and factors that intensifies this problem. For this paper, some interviews have been conducted where some tertiary level's teachers have given their opinion in handling the issue of mixed ability learners. This paper also suggests some solutions, some effective teaching strategies to be followed in a mixed ability classroom which will allow the teacher to reach out to good as well as weak students.

**Key Words:** Mixed ability classroom, higher ability learner, lower ability learner, ability grouping, effective learning.

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### **I. OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES FACED IN A MIXED ABILITY CLASSROOM**

There is hardly any language classroom where the teacher did not face the problem of mixed ability learners. Language classroom always consists learners of mixed ability even though the learners are in the same level. Different factors such as motivation, learning skill, learning ability, aptitude, background, etc, vary from one individual to other and as a result, the gap among the same level's learners even broadens from elementary level to intermediate level and from intermediate to advanced level. The issue of mixed ability learners is prevalent in both small and large classrooms but it is much more severe and far more difficult to handle in a large classroom. It is a great challenge for the teacher to ensure effective learning in a mixed ability classroom. The syllabus and classroom activities have to be designed in such a way that it is neither too demanding for the weak learners nor unchallenging for the more competent learners.

#### **What is a Mixed - Ability Classroom?**

Before dealing with the challenges and effective strategies of a mixed ability classroom, one must have a very clear concept of it. According to Cambridge Dictionaries Online (2008), Mixed- Ability classroom can be defined as a class "involving students of different levels of ability". Richards and Schmidt (2010) have further elaborated the term as "a class containing learners of different ability levels as reflected in differences in Language Aptitude, motivation and learning styles." According to them, most classes contain learners of mixed abilities but when the difference becomes greater, it may "affect classroom dynamics and classroom management." Ireson & Hallam (2001) suggest teachers need to recognize that a class is "mixed ability" because children have different strengths and weaknesses and develop at different rates. Language classrooms consist a large variety of students of different levels and according to Penny Ur (1996), mixed ability language classes are "classes of learners among whom there are marked differences in level of performances in the foreign language."

### **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the 40's and 50's, in United Kingdom there was a trend of dividing classes based on the ability of the learners. The government came to the decision of ability grouping with the target or hope of pupil attainment. Many believed that ability grouping help learners to achieve excellence. At the same time, it is much easier for teachers to conduct classes if the classes consist learners of similar ability. Even though in theory, ability grouping seems to be the better choice for learners' academic attainment, but, in reality that was not the case. According to Penny Ur (1996), "there is no such thing as a 'homogeneous' class, since no two learners are really similar." So, dividing the pupil based on their ability cannot not have that much impact as there still will be much differences among them. Harmer (2003) adds, "In the 50's and 60's it crystalized around the belief that

it was possible to predict a student's future progress on the basis of linguistic aptitude test. But soon it became clear that such tests were flawed". No tests could properly divide the students based on their ability and, thus, failed to provide a homogenous classroom. Ireson & Hallam (2001) mention "during the 60's and 70's, several research studies were completed, demonstrating that streaming had little impact on attainment." And some researches indicate "higher ability pupils performing better" in classes that are divided based on students' ability and "the lower ability pupils performing worse", who suffered from negative social consequences. Then, in the 70's there was a shift towards learner centered approach. More importance was given on individual development and equal opportunity rather than on academic attainment. So the classes were mostly mixed ability instead of ability grouping since streaming had no significant effect on maximizing academic success. In the 90's, some institutions focused on increasing standard and went back to selective streaming, but later, moved away from within class ability grouping towards mixed ability classes.

### **III. MIXED ABILITY LEARNERS**

Every language teacher has to face a mixed ability class as all students are more or less different from one another. Penny Ur (1996) believes, "all classes of more than one learner are in fact heterogeneous" since there are many factors that differentiate the learners from each other. She has shown the following differences between learners in heterogeneous classes

- |                              |                                  |                       |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Language learning ability | 7. Intelligence                  | 14. Confidence        |
| 2. Language knowledge        | 8. World knowledge               | 15. Motivation        |
| 3. Cultural background       | 9. Learning experience           | 16. Interest          |
| 4. Learning style            | 10. Knowledge of other languages | 17. Independence      |
| 5. Attitude to the language  | 11. Age or maturity              | 18. Self-discipline   |
| 6. Mother tongue             | 12. Gender                       | 19. Educational level |
|                              | 13. Personality                  |                       |

According to Tomlinson (1999), there is no single 'right way' to create an effectively differentiated classroom. So, rather than ability grouping, it is better to accept the diversity of learners and plan the lessons according to individual learners need for optimal learning as learners can be diverse based on so many factors.

#### **Advantages of Mixed Ability Classroom**

It is undeniable that teaching in a mixed ability classroom is challenging. But teachers often get blindsided by this and fail to see the advantages a mixed ability classroom has to offer. Penny Ur (1996) has pointed out some of the advantage of heterogeneous classes.

1. Such classes provide a much richer pool of human resources than do smaller or less mixed classes. The individuals have between them far more life experience and knowledge, more varied options, more interests and ideas- all of which can be used in classroom interaction.
2. There is educational value in the actual contact between very different kinds of the people.
3. Peer teaching and collaboration are likely to be fairly common fostering an atmosphere of cooperation.
4. These classes can be seen as very much challenging and interesting to teach, and provide greater opportunity for creativity, innovation and general professional development.

Similarly, Ireson & Hallam (2001) point out some advantages of mixed ability classroom. They think that "mixed ability classes are better because you could learn more things from other people". Learners in such classes not only learn from the teacher but also from each other. In a mixed ability classroom learners interact and communicate with each other, who are different in many aspects, which offer an authentic learning experience and prepare them for the real world. It also allows the weaker students to feel motivated to work harder by seeing the academically stronger students getting good grades as they no longer have to suffer from low esteem or inferiority complex.

#### **Problems Faced in Mixed Ability Classroom**

The challenges faced in mixed ability classroom are twofold. It is very challenging for teachers as well as for students. Teachers and learners both struggle to ensure effective learning in a mixed ability classroom. The challenges faced by the students are given below. In a mixed ability classroom, learners with higher ability easily understand the lesson, whereas, learners with lower ability struggle. So, when the lessons or activities are very easy, the latter finds it effective, but the former finds it redundant or boring. On the other hand, when the lessons are demanding, higher ability students tend to enjoy the tasks, but lower ability students struggle and

eventually give up. So, for both types of learners, there is a possibility that they will lose the motivation to study as they might find activities too easy or too demanding.

In order to ensure effective learning, especially in a language classroom, participation of students is a must. In a mixed ability classroom, higher ability students are more likely to participate enthusiastically in the classroom activities. On a contrary, students with lower ability might feel self-conscious and restrain from participating in the activities. Thus, learners with higher ability will excel further and learners with lower ability may not show any sign of improvement at all.

Sometimes, in mixed ability classroom it becomes very much apparent that there is a substantial difference among the ability of students. As a result, the students of lower ability suffer from low self-esteem problem. And students with higher ability, on the other hand, suffer from lack of enthusiasm. Thus, students no longer enjoy the overall learning experience and effective learning gets hampered for either group of students. Mixed ability classroom is mostly challenging for the teachers as they face the following problems.

The first and the most difficult problem a teacher faces in mixed ability classroom is to ensure effective learning for all. The higher ability students finish exercises and activities very quickly and they find it easy to follow the lessons and instructions; whereas, the students with lower ability struggle. If a teacher focuses more on the students of higher ability, soon the lower ability students will find the tasks so difficult that they will feel demotivated and might give up. On a contrary, if the teacher focuses on the needs of the lower ability students, the higher ability students will lose interest in the lessons, as they will find them extremely easy. So, in both cases, one group will lose interest and effective learning for all will not be ensured. So, the teacher needs to play a very important role to make sure that the lessons or activities are not too challenging for the lower ability students; at the same time, the higher ability students are also enjoying them.

Designing syllabus, materials, lessons and activities in a mixed ability classroom can be very challenging for the teacher. Most available materials are designed for an ideal classroom situation, where all students belong to the same competency level. But in reality, teacher has to come up with certain materials which are suitable for the whole class. Materials comprising of too difficult or too easy tasks will only benefit one particular group, where the other group will lose interest. So the teacher must maintain a balance while designing materials, keeping in mind the individual interests of students, to ensure they are effective for the whole class, not a particular group of students.

### **Solutions for Overcoming the Challenges**

The main teaching goal in any language classroom is to ensure effective learning for everyone. In a mixed ability classroom, some extra strategies are necessary for ensuring so. Some effective strategies and some possible solutions to overcome the challenges in a mixed ability classroom are given below.

The most important thing a teacher needs to do in a mixed ability classroom is to choose learning materials and classroom activities very carefully. It is better to choose activities of wide varieties as each activity may evoke interest in different learners. The teacher must also consider the different levels of learners, as these activities will not be too easy or too difficult for any individual learner. As Shank and Terrill (1995) suggest, 'To ensure some success for all learners in the multilevel classroom, teachers must determine what each learner needs and want to learn.' Teachers can use 'a variety of techniques and grouping strategies and a selection of self-assess materials to help all learners be successful, comfortable for at least a portion of each class time.' If every individual student feels interested and motivated by at least some of the materials or activities covered in the class, hopefully, effective learning for all can be ensured.

According to Tomlinson (1999), three elements play a very important role in a language classroom to ensure effective learning for all, which are: environment, curriculum and instruction. In a classroom the students should feel welcomed and valued as they are. For optimal learning they have to consider the classroom as a 'safe place' where they can share their opinions and thoughts without any fear or hesitation. The teacher must design quality curriculum and the instructions should be given considering the readiness, interest and learning profile of individual learners in order to come up with the learners' preferred approach for learning.

Hess (2001) believes learning students' names can be very effective for a language classroom. According to her, 'Learning students' names quickly in large classes isn't easy but it is essential' as 'it promotes good basic human relationship', teachers, as well as students, feel more 'comfortable' and 'better' and 'it is helpful in monitoring student records (test results, attendance, assignments).' She also thinks, 'Students appreciate a teacher who takes an interest in their likes and dislikes, their special interests and their difficulties.' Since it allows students to feel more comfortable while expressing themselves and teachers get the opportunity to observe them more closely (on personal level), it can help to ensure effective learning and monitor individual progress.

Some other strategies can also be helpful, such as having a contingency plan for early finishers and giving some extra time (giving counsel) or extra home tasks for lower ability learners. The former can help in two ways, as it keeps the early finishers busy, they no longer feel less challenged or de-motivated and it also

helps to maintain the discipline of the classroom. The latter can help the lower ability students because it allows them (those students who need more help) to get some extra focus and extra tasks will give them the opportunity to practice even more which eventually improve their level of competence. If teachers spend more times with weaker students, it helps them to solve some problems, share their difficulties and as Shank and Terrill (1995) suggest, “teachers’ enthusiasm and goodwill can usually encourage learners”.

Many experts suggest that during class if the students are given some group activities, it allows the students to learn from their peers. In a mixed ability class, students come from a very diverse background. So, interaction among students will play a vital role in their language learning process. But teachers have to form the groups wisely in order to ensure optimum learning. Students can be divided into groups in many ways. Groups can be formed containing both higher and lower ability students or just higher ability and lower ability students. In the former group, weaker students will get necessary help and support from their peers and in the latter one the teachers will have to give extra attention to the groups containing only lower ability students. The groups containing only higher ability students are expected to need little help from the teacher. Thus, it becomes easier for teachers to manage classroom activities, at the same time it allows some scope to students to learn important things from their peers.

### **Analysis**

For this paper, five tertiary level’s teachers have been interviewed. All of them are teaching in Bangladeshi universities, two of them (both male) in public universities as lecturer and three of them (female) in private universities, one as lecturer and the other two as assistant professor. Each question and their responses are given in order. The interview questions are also included in the appendix at the end of the paper.

#### **1. Have you faced the problem of mixed -ability learners in your classroom?**

All of them have agreed that they have faced this problem in their classes and one of them believes most of the teachers do face this problem very often in language classrooms. One teacher added that it becomes a big problem to manage classes or cover contents of syllabus when in a class, a group of students are very enthusiastic, competent, participates in the classroom activities and finish tasks early and another group of students who are less confident, less competent, do not willingly participate in classroom activities and take more time to finish tasks.

#### **2. How do you address the issue?**

For this question, each of them has given different opinions.

One male lecturer answered that he usually divides his lectures into two parts: one that seriously deals with the elaboration and explanation of the topic; another part sums up the topic in a comparatively easier language.

Another male lecturer said that, to handle the situation in the classroom, sometimes he uses L1 to explain the important points when he finds some students are confused. He also makes the students form pair or small groups to discuss the problems and sometimes he picks someone who he thinks did not understand the lesson properly and asks lesson related questions and engages in a discussion with him so that the whole class can hear.

The female lecturer answered that she tries to engage everyone in the classroom activities by coming up with varieties of tasks, so every student finds some tasks interesting.

One assistant professor answered that she wants to focus on the need of the majority of her students. Then, she tries to give further instruction or explanation to help the lower ability students. She tries to ensure more inclusive teaching.

The other assistant professor suggested some techniques she uses in her class like, asking the answers of close ended questions to the more competent students so everyone gets to hear the correct answers and asking open ended questions to less competent students and engage in discussion in order to ensure hundred percent participation. Sometimes she forms groups with more competent and less competent students, so the weaker students can learn few things from their peers.

#### **3. In your opinion, what are the factors behind this problem of mixed- ability learners?**

Considering the English classes in our country, one of the male lecturer says that the main cause is nothing more than linguistic barriers; another major factor is, in most of the cases, the students, regardless of their different intellectual levels, ignore their own necessities and completely depend upon the teacher.

The other male lecturer believes the main factors are - wrong placement, lack of motivation on student’s part, teacher’s indifference to ensure progress of all of his/her students

According to the female lecturer, the main factors are- lack of enthusiasm and motivation of students, teachers’ failure to understand the needs of every students, background of the students and lack of variety in classroom activities.

One assistant professor thinks that there can be many factors. Considering the socio-cultural situation of Bangladesh, the students' background plays the most important role. Students, who studied in the schools or colleges of city, especially in the renowned institutions, tend to do better than the students of rural areas. The other assistant professor thinks that in tertiary level, previous educational background plays a very important role. Lack of ability grouping in the university also allows for classes of mixed ability.

**4. Do you think dividing the class into smaller groups (based on their ability) can be an effective way to handle this issue? Why or why not?**

All of them agreed that dividing the class into smaller groups, especially for certain tasks can be very effective. But three of them think that students should be divided in smaller groups in such a way where every group contains both lower and higher ability students or at least one student has greater ability than the rest. In this way, the lower ability students get benefits as the higher ability students help them understand the lesson, to do the exercises or assignments properly. On the other hand, the other two think that it is better to divide them into groups of similar abilities. In this way, groups consist of students with higher ability will need little help from the teacher and teacher will be able to focus or pay more attention to the groups that consist of lower ability students. In both cases, teachers will play an important role as they have to motivate the learners and have to intervene throughout the task to ensure that every student is participating properly to finish the tasks.

**5. Is there any particular strategy you follow to ensure effective learning in a mixed ability learners' classroom?**

One of the male lecturer said that, to ensure effective learning, he tries to make his class interactive. It allows the students to learn from their peers, students more comfortably share their opinions, feel motivated and actively participate.

The other male teacher said that to ensure effective learning in a mixed ability learners' classroom he asks the students to go for group discussions and peer-correction. He also divides his lectures in two phases, one part dealing with critical issues and the other part dealing with easy explanation of topics, so the higher ability students will not feel less challenged or de-motivated and lower ability students will not find it too difficult or challenging.

The female lecturer said that the strategy she follows to ensure effective learning is to monitor her students very carefully. This allows her to focus on the learners' individual needs and address them properly. She includes various activities as everyone cannot learn in the same manner. By monitoring them individually, she can come up with tasks that will motivate every learner and it helps her to keep track of their gradual progress.

One of the assistant professor usually gives some extra time to her lower ability students and provide them regular counseling (especially after class). And in class, sometimes, she asks some of her higher ability student to explain or make a summary of the lesson. In this way, the higher ability students feel included, at the same time, the explanation helps the lower ability student understand the lesson.

The other assistant professor believes that to ensure effective learning she needs to ensure equal participation. Whether it is a group activity or individual task, she tries to make sure that every student is actively participating to finish the task.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Language teachers simply cannot avoid a mixed ability classroom. Most experts lately have come to this conclusion that ability grouping is not as beneficial for students as it was thought to be. It is practically impossible to get a homogeneous classroom as no ability grouping is absolute. So, instead of hoping for a homogeneous classroom, it is better to accept the reality and apply certain strategies to ensure effective learning for all. The strategies that have been mentioned earlier (suggested by many experts and also some tertiary level teachers, who were interviewed) will help teachers to minimize the challenges they face in a mixed ability classroom. The teachers have to play a vital role in addressing the issue as they need to design the course contents in such a way that allow scopes for optimum learning for both higher and lower ability students and choose a wide range of classroom activities that interest and motivate every learner. They should also closely monitor every student to assess their gradual progression and ensure that everyone is utilizing their full potential. Thus, they will hopefully be able to overcome the challenges of mixed ability classroom and effective learning of every learner will be ensured.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions:**

1. Have you faced the problem of mixed -ability learners in your classroom?
2. How do you address the issue?
3. In your opinion, what are the factors behind this problem of mixed- ability learners?
4. Do you think dividing the class into smaller groups (based on their ability) can be an effective way to handle this issue? Why or why not?
5. Is there any particular strategy you follow to ensure effective learning in a mixed ability learners' classroom?

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