

Reality of EFL Classes: With Students of Varied Proficiency Levels

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Abstract

In most of the Bangladeshi EFL classrooms, students with a varied level of proficiency in English create a considerable amount of challenges for the teachers in terms of teaching techniques and classroom management. At tertiary level there are students who have a good understanding of English and there are students who even don't have a basic understanding of the language. There are students who fall in between these two groups. The simultaneous development in English of such groups of students in the same class makes the task of the teacher harder, more critical and sometimes quite impossible. But it is a very common but crucial hindrance for both students and teachers in the context of Bangladesh in making language classes successful. This paper through a study aims to highlight the problems that arise because of the mixed level of students in the same EFL classroom and to show how it makes the process of language teaching and learning more difficult for the students as well as for the teachers. The paper ends with making some practical suggestions for minimizing the problem of managing large class with students of varied proficiency levels.

Keywords: classroom management, tertiary learners, teaching and learning process, students of varied proficiency levels/mixed ability students.

Introduction

In a language classroom an ideal learning atmosphere is very essential. The expected level of success is possible in an EFL classroom when students and teachers are in balanced combination with other related features such as proper logistic support, authentic and comprehensible text materials, suitable feedback, etc. Otherwise the process of teaching and learning is disrupted.

In most of the public and private universities in Bangladesh, placement test is not taken to assign students in the teaching program appropriate to their abilities. For this, a class with mixed ability students is one of the most common scenarios in Bangladeshi EFL classes. This article is based on a study that is conducted on both teachers and students to identify the criteria of problems that are created in the language classes because of having students of varied proficiency levels.

In most of the Bangladeshi EFL classrooms at tertiary level, there are students from Bangla medium, English medium and also from the madrasa stream, and so their proficiency levels in English differ. This paper shows that this variation in proficiency level creates serious problems as teachers in many cases are in dilemma in selecting and adapting text material, providing instruction or proper task and feedback on the problematic areas of the students, managing class or making the participation of every student active in classroom activities. This increases mental

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pressure for teachers and works as a continuous burden for them. On the other hand, students fail to transfer their language learning into language skill as in many cases they face difficulty in understanding English lessons or performing classroom activities in the class of mixed ability students. Students sometimes feel anxious or get bored or sometimes lose interest in the language class and after a certain time, they become demotivated in improving their proficiency level in English. This situation worsens when the number of students is 30 or 40 or even more. For this the whole process of learning and teaching in the classroom becomes an unsuccessful effort for both teachers and students which is undesirable and dissatisfactory. Therefore, this study also mentions some ways of dealing with those factors in order to minimize those problems that arise because of students of varied proficiency levels in the same classroom.

Students with varied proficiency levels in language classrooms: an overview

Teaching the students with varied proficiency levels has always been a matter of challenge for the teachers. Hess (2001: 4-6) has presented some of the challenges that a teacher needs to face in a mixed level classroom such as:

- We often feel out of control
- In a large class we sometimes feel trapped in the problems
- It is difficult to provide for individual learning style
- Activating the quiet student is difficult

Ur (2002) mentions that discipline, correcting written assignments, individual awareness, participation, interest, materials and effective learning for all are the problems of a heterogeneous class.

When the number of students in a class with mixed ability students is in between 30-40, the task of the teacher becomes more difficult. Rinvoluceri (1986: 17, cited in Maddalena, 2002) states, “We do not teach a group, but thirty separate people. Because of this, the problem of mixed abilities in the same room seems absolutely natural, and it is the idea of teaching a unitary lesson that seems odd”

The situation in EFL classes in Bangladesh is just the same where teachers face similar problems in dealing with mixed ability students. “In Bangladesh, the mixed ability tertiary learners’ level of improvement in communicative competence in English is very slow even after receiving instructions from teachers. Though teachers at this level are practicing group and pair work in these classes, students still think that competitive environment prevails in the class and is affecting their learning process. Sequentially, teachers are remaining far from achieving the desired level of satisfaction in teaching the students” (Jahn, 2008: 53).

So, the teachers are always concerned with dealing mixed level students in the classroom as they are confronted with different sorts of problems and they always try to find out different ways to minimize those problems.

EFL classrooms with students of varied proficiency levels at tertiary level in Bangladesh

At tertiary level of education in Bangladesh, students get themselves admitted in different disciplines from different backgrounds (English, Bangla and Madrasa) and they need to study English as the medium of instruction is English and the books are also in English. Though all the students get schooling for almost 12 years to improve their English language skill, the foundation in English for most of the students is very weak and sometimes really poor. But to study in the higher level, students need a minimum level of accuracy and proficiency in English. So, all of them have to do some language courses. In such language courses students' proficiency level in English varies so much in the same class that to improve their proficiency level in most cases is very difficult.

Another important matter that is to be noticed is that students in Bangladesh do not get any exposure to use English outside the classroom as it is hardly used in daily communication. In such a situation, teachers are to create opportunities for different language activities in the classroom but it becomes difficult to make all the students perform at the same level with students of varied proficiency levels. To improve the proficiency level of English, implementation of different language activities is very essential, but it becomes difficult in a class with mixed ability students. "Language is a skill, and a skill needs to be applied, not just stored in the head or admired at a distance"(Marilyn 200841).

The number of students is always a crucial factor in language classrooms. In almost all the language classes at tertiary level in Bangladesh, the number of students is around 40 or even more than that. To maintain discipline in the class, to make all the students attentive to the class, to ensure their participation in different types of language activities, to provide the students proper feedback and guidance, to ensure the response and continuous development of the students are the challenges that teachers always need to consider. When there are students of different proficiency levels in a class with such a number of students, then a number of problems arise within the class which is problematic not only for the teachers but also for the students.

The selection of texts and other materials according to the level of students' proficiency is a very important factor in the language classroom. Sometimes the texts selected for them remain the same for years together, though they do not match with the varied proficiency levels of the students. The adaptation of those selected materials according to the needs of the students is also very important. This adaptation process is itself a very tough task and in a class with mixed level students, it is very difficult to go ahead and in some cases it is quite impossible.

Problems like large classroom, less exposure to English language etc., cannot be solved very quickly. But it is possible to bring the particular problem of mixed ability students into a minimum level which will make the language classes more effective. The study conducted by the researcher reflects those problems that are created by the students of varied proficiency levels in the language classes and focuses on some possible solutions and ways of minimizing the problem.

The Study

In order to identify the problems in an EFL classroom with mixed ability students, the researcher carried out a study. To collect the primary data two sets of questionnaires were developed. One was prepared for the teachers and the other for the students. In the questionnaire, there were several questions, which the participants answered in terms of “Yes”, “No”, and “Neutral” There were also some questions, which the participants answered in terms of frequency. The questionnaires may be seen in the appendix.

Participants

The students are studying in a private university located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Eighty students answered the questionnaire given by the researcher where they gave their opinions regarding the positive or negative sides of having mixed level students in the same class. Seventy-eight students were from Bangla medium schools and colleges and two students were from English medium schools and colleges. They are learning English as a foreign language. Fifteen teachers from different private universities who deal with the students of varied proficiency levels took part in this study. All of them have more than 2 years experience in teaching students at tertiary level.

Findings and Analysis

The responses given by the teachers and the students in this study enlighten some important factors that are necessary for the teaching and learning process but are hampered by having students of varied proficiency levels in the class. These are evident in the agreement of the students and the teachers with the questions in the questionnaire.

In the class with mixed ability students it is found that the input given by the instructor proves less effective for students of both weak and comparatively better ones. The students do not respond to the instructions equally and sometimes the weaker students even do not understand the instructions properly. In the present study, 61.25% students acknowledged that they face academic problems because of the different proficiency levels in their English classes. Simultaneously, 53.33% instructors find it difficult to give proper instruction and proper task in the class with mixed ability.

In such a class, even though in selecting the text and other class material, the teachers are very careful, yet making the text material understandable for every individual student becomes a difficult task. Selection of task is too challenging, as it might be too advanced for the weaker ones or too easy for the better ones. 73.33% teachers admit that they face problems in selecting proper materials for every individual student.

Classroom activities are often carried out according to the capability of the students. However, in mixed level classrooms the more proficient ones do not find the activities very interesting or simply find those easy. On the other hand, the weaker ones find the same classroom activities too difficult. Some finish the activities so quickly and sometimes think it a waste of time. Some are

late to complete the task and get more anxious because of the pressure to cope up with others. 43.75% students in the study find some classroom activities too easy for them and 37.5% students complete their classroom activities earlier than others. This is also a critical challenge for the teachers to design appropriate classroom activities which are interesting to all. 73.33% teachers reported that they find it difficult to make all the students interested in doing classroom activities properly.

In case of feedback, those who understand English very well do not find much to learn, and the weaker ones still find the responses inappropriate for them, or they do not understand. So, the feedback given by the teachers in a large class with students of varied proficiency levels to notice their lacking and to improve in their problematic areas, many a times, is not enough for the students. 73.33% teachers feel that feedback given in the language class is not appropriate enough to improve proficiency level of mixed ability students.

Time management is another constraint for the teachers. Giving instructions, making the students perform their activities, checking their task and also giving them proper feedback have to be done within a certain time. Within a limited span of time instructors have to manage a lot of things. In this study, 86.67% teachers feel that it is difficult to manage the language classroom with the students of different proficiency levels.

The continuous efforts of the comparatively weaker students, to cope up with the other students, in many cases, increase their anxiety and eventually they start to feel less self-confident. The students feel demotivated and after a certain time nothing interests them to improve their proficiency levels. Students think different types of activities as extra, not part of their learning or not essential for passing examinations. On the other hand, the activities that seem to be too easy for comparatively better students also fail to make them interested in the class. To them, the language class seems to be boring and unworthy. The study shows 48.75% students feel demotivated in a class with different proficiency levels among the students. At the same time 33.33% teachers often feel impatient or demotivated in dealing with different proficiency level students.

Analyzing the data it is easily identifiable that a mixed ability classroom creates considerable problems for both teachers and students in terms of material selection, performing classroom activities, providing feedback, and managing classrooms. Consequently, there is a chance to be demotivated in learning the language on the part of the students and also in teaching the students on the part of the teachers. But this is a practical and common problem in the context of Bangladesh.

Recommendations

Placement test (i.e. making small groups of students according to their proficiency level) can be an effective way to deal with the students of varied proficiency levels. Even 80% teachers feel that language learning and teaching would be more successful if the percentage of mixed level students was minimum in the class. Nevertheless, most of the universities still do not take any placement test to place the students according to their proficiency level though it is a serious

matter to consider. In such situations, some other strategies can be adopted to minimize the problem.

Teachers can promote cooperative learning or group work or pair work to encourage mutual helpfulness in the groups or active participation of all members. The group which will complete the task early can help other groups to finish their task. Teachers can also give some tasks for the individuals who are comparatively better in the groups. When the group work will be finished earlier, then the students can complete their individual work. Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1994, cited in Jahn, 2008) have observed that cooperative learning helps to build up ‘positive’ relationship among learners and replaces “the competitive organizational structure of most classrooms and schools with team based, high-performance organizational structure” (p. 50).

To prevent teachers from making too small groups, more advanced students can work with the beginning level students. This not only helps the beginners, but also helps more advanced students to revise the basics. The study shows that 82.5% students think working in pairs or in groups is more interesting in language classroom than working individually. Simultaneously, 93.33% teachers prefer group work or pair work in the class with the students of different proficiency levels.

In the classes of mixed level students, there are also some facilities which teachers can utilize to minimize the problems faced by them. Such kinds of classes provide a rich variety of human resources with more knowledge, ideas, interest and experience that can be used for classroom interaction in the class and can make the classes more interesting to all the students in the class.

Conclusion

Even though it would be impractical to get completely rid of the problem of students with varied proficiency levels in the same class, this issue should be dealt with utmost importance. This paper is an attempt to figure out those problems faced by teachers and students in mixed ability classrooms at tertiary level so that it can help those who deal with this sort of problem and can give a proper insight to the different perspectives of this problem. At the same time, they can apply their own judgement and be innovative in finding out some practical solutions apart from the ones mentioned in the study to deal with the problems. As these problems disrupt the whole process of teaching and learning, different techniques to minimize those problems should be followed rather than living with them. How best these problems can be dealt with is an area of further study.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for students

Background of the students: Bangla medium/ English medium/Madrasa
 Number of the students in your English Language Class: 20/30/40/50.

		1		2		3		4	
		Yes		No		Neutral			
		Always		often		sometimes		Never	
		Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
1	Do you think that there are different proficiency levels in English among the students of your class?	64	80%	7	8.75%	9	11.25%	-	-
2	Have you ever faced any academic problem because of the different proficiency levels in your English Language class?	49	61.25%	27	33.75%	4	5%	-	-
3	Do you feel demotivated in the classroom when you finish your classroom activities earlier or later than others?	39	48.75%	28	35%	13	16.25%	-	-

		1		2		3		4	
		Yes		No		Neutral			
		Always		often		sometimes		Never	
		Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
4	Do you think working in pairs or in groups is interesting in language classroom than working individually?	66	82.5%	7	8.75%	7	8.75%	-	-
5	Do you often complete your classroom activities earlier than others?	9	11.25%	30	37.5%	26	32.5%	15	18.75%
6	Do you often complete your classroom activities later than others?	7	8.75%	36	45%	24	30%	13	16.25%
7	Do you often complete your activities too difficult for you?	16	20%	28	35%	25	31.25%	11	13.75%
8	Do you find any classroom activities too easy for you?	9	11.25%	35	43.75%	19	23.75%	17	21.25%

Questionnaire for teachers

Experience as a Teacher: -----months/ ----- years

Number of students in Language Classroom: 20/30/40

		1		2		3		4	
		Yes		No		Neutral			
		Always		often		sometimes		Never	
		Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
1	Do you find most of the classes of yours with mixed ability students?	15	100%	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	Do you face problems in selecting proper material for every individual student in your class?	11	73.33%	4	26.67%	-	-	-	-
3	Do you find it is difficult to give instruction or proper task in the class with mixed ability students?	8	53.33%	7	46.67%	-	-	-	-
4	Do you think it is difficult to make all the students interested in doing classroom activities properly?	11	73.33%	3	20%	1	6.67%	-	-
5	Do you feel the feedback given by you in the language class is appropriate enough to improve their proficiency level?	11	73.33%	3	20%	1	6.67%	-	-
6	Do you find it is difficult to manage the language classroom because of the students with different proficiency level?	13	86.67%	2	13.33%	-	-	-	-
7	Do you prefer group work or pair work in the class with the students of different proficiency level?	14	93.33%	1	6.67%	-	-	-	-

		1		2		3		4	
		Yes		No		Neutral			
		Always		often		sometimes		Never	
		Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
8	Do you think language learning and teaching would be more successful if the percentage of mixed level students was of minimum level?	12	80%	3	20%	-	-	-	-
9	How often do you find the students of your class feel more anxiety and low self- confidence?	3	20%	4	26.67%	8	53.33%	-	-
10	How often have you felt impatient or demotivated in dealing with students of different proficiency level?	1	6.66%	6	40%	4	26.67%	4	26.67%