

## Mixed-Ability In EFL Crowded Classes (Problems And Solutions)

Aisha F Al Emam, Sydeda S Khuram

<sup>1,2</sup> Department Of English Language ,College Of Art And Science, Northern Border University ,Turaif, Saudi Arabia .

---

### Abstract:

EFL classes, specially the crowded ones are mixtures of many students who are vary in many ways, with different interests, needs, intellects and many other aspects, these differences lead to the emergence of the term mixed ability or heterogeneous classes and stimulate researcher to investigate the proper techniques to deal with the mixed ability classes. The study aimed to prove that the diversity in EFL students' ability is reflected in their competence and performance of the language and investigate and find special techniques to be followed by EFL teachers in order to reach both weak and advanced learner. The study adopted the descriptive analytical method. The required data were obtained through a questionnaire, The sample of the study was thirty (30) EFL Teachers at Basic Schools from Al Hasahiesa Locality, Gezira State. The responses of the selected samples were analyzed by using( SPSS) program. The study found that: diversity in EFL classes can work as an obstacle that lead to undesirable results, students vary in many things such as the variation in their intelligence, needs and academic readiness, and students' differences can be classified into two categories, environmental differences or genetic differences . The study recommended EFL teacher to pay attention to the differences between students in large classes and try to find the proper techniques to manage these classrooms and achieve the educational aims.

**Keywords:** Mixed-Ability class, Crowded, large classes, diversity

---

Date of Submission: 14-03-2024

Date of Acceptance: 24-03-2024

---

### I. Introduction

The process of teaching and learning EFL requires certain procedures and passes through different levels in order to score a high rate of understanding of structure and skills of the language and increase the performance of students in highly progressed way. Teachers in EFL classes have a definite time and they are expected to teach and get the highest performance from students despite of the individual differences between them, their ages, intellect and their ability to learn...etc. , all that cause problems to teachers. To avoid such problems teachers should be qualified enough to know their students' abilities and must be aware of dealing with the mixed abilities in their classes to achieve better performance from the whole class.

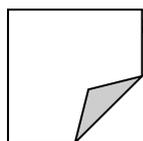
### II. Statement of Problem

EFL crowded classes vary in many ways and there is a great diversity between students, their ages, intellect and their ability to learn, these diversity in abilities between students may hinder the process of teaching English Language, and it's difficult for many teachers to capture all students' attention and give them the required skills. So many teachers only focus on the students who have high intellect and ability to learn those who can perform well in short time, accordingly they neglect the students who have a less abilities or learning difficulties. This negligence is a big mistake and has a serious effect on students learning of the EFL

### III. Objectives Of The Study

This study is aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- 1- to prove that the diversity in EFL students' ability is reflected in their competence and performance of the language.
- 3- to investigate and find special techniques to be followed by EFL teachers in order to reach both weak and advanced learners.



#### **IV. Questions of the Study:**

The questions of the study are:

1- To what extent does the diversity in students' abilities affect teaching and learning EFL basic skills and reflected in students' performance?

3-What are the techniques that must be followed in order to cope with the brilliant smart and weak students to increase the effectiveness of the educational process?

#### **V. Literature Review**

The term mixed-ability classes means classes where students differ greatly in ability, motivation for learning English, needs, interests, educational background, styles of learning, anxiety ,experiences and so on (1 ). All teachers have to face the challenge of mixed-ability classes because, according to (2), every class is multileveled. Some classes can be more multileveled than others and therefore more challenging for the teacher, but all classes are mixed-ability classes.

#### **VI. Individual Differences**

There are quantitative differences in the quantity, speed and depth of learning. Some students can understand a new concept after one lesson whereas others may need to re-examine an idea several times before being able to grasp it. After a series of lessons, the amount of knowledge acquired and the extent to which new concepts or skills are well understood varies greatly across students. There are cognitive differences between students. Cognitive differences concern personality traits, motivation, needs and interests. Students differ, for example, on their level of personal autonomy, level of achievement motivation, tolerance of ambiguity, and test anxiety. In terms of students' interests in a given subject matter, differences are observed across individuals due in part to their age, cultural heritage and gender. Studies show that memory of reading passages depends on the degree to which students find the text interesting, in addition to students' levels of reading ability and the objective difficulty-level of the text (3). There are qualitative differences in the ways that students learn best.

#### **VII. Reasons for the Diversity Between Learners**

psychologists specializing in developmental psychology have proved that a human being is formed partly genetically by inheriting genes of his/her ancestors and partly through the environment he/she grows up in and experience. Psychology offers its explanation for successful or unsuccessful performance of learners at schools and education generally. The reasons are numerous. (4) Explains that there are three types of underlying causes: social psychological, bio-psychological and intra-psychical.

#### **VIII. Mixed-Ability Grouping**

Mixed-Ability Grouping means within the same context randomly chosen students gathered in one class regardless of their abilities or achievements in the subject concerned. However, the intended topic of this paper is mixed-ability classes in connection with teaching and learning English as a foreign language, particularly in a language school. The students in language schools are usually placed in courses/classes according to the results of an entrance test where they have to prove their knowledge of English. From what has been said so far we would say these classes are rather 'set' than 'mixed-ability' as the students who eventually meet in one classroom have passed their entrance tests with the same or very similar outcomes.

Mixed-abilities classes, which are also called Heterogeneous classes, are the aim of this study, focusing particularly on problems teachers face and on strategies and techniques to overcome these problems. (5) Expresses her preference in using the term heterogeneous rather than mixed-ability classes:

*"The term 'mixed-ability', however, implies that the important difference between members of a mixed class is in their language-learning ability, but this is not necessarily so. Even if the main observed difference between them is in the amount of language they know, this may have its roots in all sorts of other reasons besides ability.*

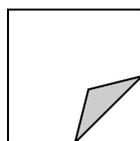
Ur also adds "there are plenty of other differences between learners that need to be taken into account by a teacher.... Thus the term 'heterogeneous' – composed of different kinds of people – is I think more suitable in defining such classes".

#### **IX. Some Problems in the Mixed Ability Classes**

(6) Suggest many problems in mixed ability classes as:

##### **1- Effective Learning**

The aim of the teachers is to reach all students. However, it is well known that every student has a different way of learning, and learns and progresses at different speeds. Thus, while some students may find the learning task very easy to deal with, others may find it difficult to understand. Besides, learning also depends on



what students have brought with them into class. Since each comes from a different family, a different environment and/or a different nation, the multi-cultural population of the classroom may be an obstacle for the teachers in reaching the students, which eventually results in ineffective learning. Moreover, although it is quite difficult for the teacher to know about each student and to follow what each one does during the lessons even in small classes, it is important for teachers to monitor each and every student and to reach their needs in a variety of ways.

## **2- Materials**

Since most language textbooks are designed for an ideal homogeneous classroom environment, teachers always have to deal with the problem that students react to the textbook differently due their individual differences. First of all, some students may find the textbook boring and very hard, whereas some find it interesting or very easy. In addition, as language teaching course materials are currently based on content-based or theme-based syllabi, some students may find the topics dull, strange, or meaningless; whereas others find it enjoyable, familiar or interesting. Therefore, it is usually necessary for the teacher to evaluate and adapt the materials according to his/her class.

## **3- Participation**

Since the classroom is the first and only environment for many foreign language learners, they should use this chance as much as possible. However, some of the students find it difficult to speak in the target language for many reasons ranging from interest to confidence, from age to knowledge. Other students, however, would like to express everything they think or feel by using the new language. As a result, some students may take many turns, while others do not speak for the entire lesson.

## **4- Interests**

Interest problems may arise due to the differences among students in terms of their attitude towards the subject matter and/or the teacher; their knowledge of language; and their personality. For instance, some students may find lessons boring, as the topic has no familiarity with their own life or their interests. Furthermore, some of the students may not be interested in the lesson, unless they do get the chance to express their own ideas since the teacher talks too much during the lesson or the other students take many turns. Hence, teachers should be aware of the different interests of the students to organize and to arrange activities accordingly. (7). A huge problem that we must not forget, according to (8), is the teacher's unawareness of the need for a new approach to deal with the mixed-ability class.

# **X. Types of Activities Used in Mixed-Ability Class**

## **1- Activities According to the Students' Roles**

**Competitive** – the results are compared and the best one is a winner.

**Cooperative** – students work together on a task, the results are presented to the rest of the class when finished, the teacher does not evaluate whose work is better, the teacher only evaluates if the task was completed or not.

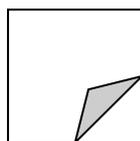
## **2- Competitive Activities**

Activities including the element of competition are often recommended to increase the interest of students in participating in such activity and to make students work as hard as possible to win.

Since the competitions are usually connected with the knowledge of the subject in concern, the problem is that in a class the same group of stronger students tend to be the ones who end up on the first positions. Therefore the competitions might be interesting for this group only as all being on a very similar level and having similar abilities they have roughly equal chances to succeed. Nevertheless, the fact that the winning students tend to be the same at different occasions means that also the students who are not successful, What is worse, if a competitive atmosphere is supported in the class on a long-term basis, the students will adopt the esprit of "Either I or you – if you then not me" .

## **3- Cooperative Activities**

Cooperative activities might be done either in groups or in pairs. A group or a pair might be formed by students with the same knowledge of English (same abilities) or mixed. The advantage of the same level students working together is that they feel comfortable not being confronted by anyone stronger, they can relax and work with their partner/s in the same speed as they are used to. Why to form groups of mixed ability students then. According to (9) and many others all the students might profit from such arrangement when carried out appropriately, in a friendly atmosphere. The weaker students have partners to help them with difficulties (e.g. explain issues on their own level of thinking and experience which might be more understandable than the teacher's explanations) and if given a task they can handle successfully, their work will be appreciated by stronger



students, which is undoubtedly highly motivating. Generally, working side to side with people who have a wider range of knowledge is inspirational and might lead to the weaker student's desire to reach the same level as the stronger partners.

#### 4- Activities According to the Number of Students Working Together

##### a) Individual Activities

Individual activities seem the most suitable for students in mixed ability classes for several reasons: they allow students to work in their own pace, students are not stressed by better or worse performance of others during the activity and to complete a task the students have to use their own knowledge, i.e. they have to rely on themselves. The students should be encouraged not to copy from a neighbor, so that they show effort and active thinking – thus strengthening what they have learnt.

##### b) Pair and Group Activities

Pair and group activities have been actually already touched in the section on cooperative and competitive activities.

#### 5- Activities According to the Expected Result

##### a) Closed Activities

Shortly put, **closed activities** are those where the possibilities of outcome are limited (closed) to one correct answer. An example of such an activity might be cloze tests or marking statements based on a reading or listening exercise true or false. They are usually connected with receptive skills, i.e. reading and listening.

##### b) Open-Ended Activities

**Open-ended activities** are those where the outcome varies from a student to student, pair to pair or a group to group. The task might be to discuss a controversial issue and provide reasons supporting one's opinions or writing an anecdote, essay, letter etc. Productive skills, i.e. speaking and writing are usually the skills to be used. Obviously, the types of activities given above combine. Some exercises might be carried out as an open-ended group-work with the element of competition and some might be an open-ended task to be worked on individually. All types, though, might be used successfully in a heterogeneous class if the teacher is able to employ all the students, make them participate and succeed.

### XI. Using Drama Language Classroom

There are plenty of reasons supporting their employment in a language classroom. The first important function associated with drama is fostering speaking skills. As (10) comments, "although drama has existed as a potential language teaching tool for hundreds of years it has only been in the last thirty years or so that its applicability as a language learning technique to improve oral skills has come to the forefront".

According to (11), drama benefits work through a series of paradoxes. Specifically, participants are able to:

- be emotionally involved but at the same time distant, since they know that the situation is merely fictional;
- act being serious but with no responsibility, as the fictitious context releases them from being responsible of their actions;
- be actors as well as audience;
- bring personal experiences into the fictitious context, but also create new ones within the symbolic frame of drama.

### XII. Methodology

This study used descriptive analytical method a questionnaire used for data collection from thirty (30) EFL Teachers at Basic Schools from Al Hasahiesa Locality, Gezira State, Sudan. For the presentation of the results the researcher uses percentages and tables, for more explanation. This tool has been analyzed statistically with the (SPSS) program.

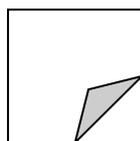
#### Reliability and Validity of the Questionnaire

$$r_{XY} = \frac{N(\sum XY) - (\sum X \sum Y)}{\sqrt{[N(\sum X^2) - (\sum X)^2][N(\sum Y^2) - (\sum Y)^2]}}$$

Where

r = correlation

R: Reliability of the test



N: number of all items in the test

X: odd scores

Y: even scores

$\Sigma$ : Sum

$R = \frac{2 \times r}{1+r}$

1+r

Val =  $\sqrt{\text{reliability}}$

Correlation = 0.80

$$R = \frac{2 \times r}{1 + r} = \frac{2(0.80)}{1 + 80} = \frac{1.6}{1.80}$$

Reliability = 0.89

$$\text{Val} = \sqrt{0.89}$$

Validity = 0.94

### XIII. Conclusion, Findings And Recommendations

#### Conclusion

The study concluded that, differences in crowded classes are inevitable and they happen as a result of many reasons. It's the role of EFL teachers to find the proper ways to deal with students despite their different abilities.

#### Findings

The study found that:

- 1- Diversity in EFL classes can work as an obstacle that lead to undesirable results
- 2- Students vary in many things such as the variation in their intelligence, needs and academic readiness.
- 3- Students' differences can be classified under two main categories, environmental differences or genetic differences.
- 4- Student centered approach for teaching foreign language gives EFL students good opportunity to use the language.
- 5- Using modern technologies (ICTs) engage student to the lessons and motivate them.

#### Recommendations

- 1- EFL should teacher pay attention to the differences between students in large classes and try to find the proper techniques to manage the classroom and achieve the educational aims.
- 2- EFL classes should be well equipped and ready with different facilities.
- 3- Teachers should continuously praise and positive reinforcement encourage both weak and advanced learners for better performance.
- 4- Individual differences need to be assessed in order to be taken into account.
- 5- To adequately address individual differences, teachers should have a way to characterize students in a scientifically valid way.

### References

- [1] Ainslie, Susan. (1994). Mixed Ability Teaching: Meeting London: Centre For Information On Language Teaching And Research.
- [2] Tomlinson, Carol Ann. (1999). The Differentiated Classroom: Responding To The Needs Of All Learners. Alexandria, Virginia: Association For Supervision And Curriculum Development.
- [3] Snow, Nino ( 1986). Pragmatic Development. 10.4324/978053
- [4] Juan C. (2014) Diversity In The Classroom. Diversity & Faculty Development. Www Diversity. Ucla.Edu
- [5] Ur,P.,(1996) A Course In Language Teaching: Teary And Practice .Geat Britian. Cambridge University Press.273
- [6] Deniz Salli (2012). Coping With The Proplems Of Mixed Ability Classes.The Internet Tesljournal,Vol,Xi.No.8,August2005  
Http://iteslj.Org/
- [7] Kelly, A.V. (1974). Teaching Mixed Ability Classes: An Individualized Approach. London: Harper & Row Ltd.
- [8] Bowman, Brenda. (1992). Teaching English As A Foreign Languageto Large Multilevel Classes. Washington, Dc: Center For Applied Linguistics.
- [9] Harlen And Malcolm (1997) Setting And Streaming: A Research Review.(Edinburgh Scottish Council For Research In Education)
- [10] Ulsa(2008)Abdulhak .Effect Of Creative Educational Drama Activities On Developing Aural Skills In Primary School Children. American Journal Of Applied Science 5(7)877
- [11] Fleming, Mike (2006), Drama And Language Teaching The Relavence Of Wittgenstines' Concepts Of Language Game. Humanizing Language Teaching Magazine,Issue 4 From Http:Www

