

Mixed Ability Classrooms in India: A Challenge for English Language Teachers

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Abstract: English, as we all agree, is considered to be an important medium of communication and education in modern India. Though, not being the native language of so many, it definitely serves the purpose of imparting education in schools and colleges than any other language. Language learning is a natural process for the natives but for non-natives, it's an exhaustive process to learn a foreign language. The students of rural and semi-urban areas in India face such problems because English is not their mother-tongue. The crux of this issue is when these students of the rural areas assume English as a subject and do not consider English as a language of communication used globally. Nowadays most of the institutions constitute mixed ability students belonging to varied levels of aptitudes, interests, learning styles, grasps and levels of intelligence eventually posing the teachers with challenges. Since the importance of learning English as a language has reached its peak in the current century in India, the hindrances have also emerged at an equal pace. "Mixed Ability Classrooms" refer to one such difficulty for the teachers of English as a second language. The primary aim of the teachers is to reach to all the students by monitoring them in multiple methods to achieve effective teaching. The present paper delineates the problems of teaching English in mixed ability classrooms and proposes numerous strategies and techniques for dealing with mixed ability classes to achieve better results in the process of teaching and learning.

Index Terms - Mixed Ability Classroom, human resources, facilitators, adaptations, assignments.

Introduction: English, as we all agree, is considered to be an important medium of communication and education in modern India. Though, not being the native language of so many, it definitely serves the purpose of imparting education in schools and colleges than any other language. Language learning is a natural process for the natives but for non-natives, it's an exhaustive process to learn a foreign language. The students of rural and semi-urban areas in India face such problems because English is not their mother-tongue. The crux of this issue is when these students of the rural areas assume English as a subject and do not consider English as a language of communication used globally. Nowadays most of the institutions constitute mixed ability students belonging to varied levels of aptitudes, interests, learning styles, grasps and levels of intelligence eventually posing the teachers with challenges. Since the importance of learning English as a language has reached its peak in the current century in India, the hindrances have also emerged at an equal pace. "Mixed Ability Classrooms" refer to one such difficulty for the teachers of English as a second language. The primary aim of the teachers is to reach to all the students by monitoring them in multiple methods to achieve effective teaching. The present paper delineates the problems of teaching English in mixed ability classrooms and proposes numerous strategies and

techniques for dealing with mixed ability classes to achieve better results in the process of teaching and learning.

Most of us are engaged in teaching large classes at school and college level. One of the challenges of having many students in the same classroom is that there surfaces a chance to have a wide range of language proficiency levels in the classroom and sometimes it gets difficult for the teachers to accommodate to the lesson plans in order to cater to the learning requirements of all the individual students. Through this paper, I propose to share a few strategies of addressing this problem, additionally challenging the conventional perception that “only” large classes have drawbacks by proving that there are also benefits to large classes with mixed levels of ability.

In most of the colleges of our country, whether private or public, the student strength is more than 50 students per class. Hence, it becomes the sole duty of that single teacher to control and deliver an effective lesson plan to all the students. For instance, I teach English to two different sections of two different branches of engineering studies in one of the premier engineering colleges in Rajasthan. In one section, the students were arranged in terms of their ability comprising average students whereas the other section consisted of mixed students. I used to prepare one lesson plan and teach in both the sections. There was no problem in the section where there were average students, but there was always a problem in the class having mixed ability because some of the students used to understand the topic before I taught, but some, on the other hand, didn't understand even if I taught the same paragraph five times. Thus, the task of teaching turned out to be really a challenging one for me.

English Language Teachers (ELTs) in India seem to worry about the mixed ability classrooms, but they all have to be equally concerned about the mixed ability teaching which is apparently missing. To cater to the needs of a mixed ability classroom, the teachers should coin up a few strategies because these classes comprise students who not only have a mixed ability but also profess varied styles of learning. Mckeown(2004) emphatically claims, “many teachers see a mixed ability class as consisting of a group of average and able children with a subset of children who have learning problems”. In the similar vein, Ireson & Hallam(2001)suggest that, “teachers need to recognize that a class is mixed ability because children have different strengths and weaknesses and develop at different rates”. Referring to these two citations, the English language teachers can seek some solutions to their problems.

Before I highlight on the challenges of a mixed ability classroom, I would like to point out that contrary to the conventional beliefs on teaching English, mixed level or multi-level classrooms also offer some advantages if the teachers dealing with the same classrooms know how to make the use of this difference as a positive asset.

Hess (2001) has presented some of the advantages in a mixed level classroom as follows:

- There are always enough students for interaction,
- We get a rich variety of human resources,
- The teacher is not only pedagogue ,

- We are never bored,
- Professional development occurs naturally (Hess, 2-4).

When there are students composed of mixed ability in the same classroom, each individual brings out new ideas and perceptions. They may hail from different cultural backgrounds having dissimilar world-views and values amounting to a wide variety of experiences and manifold styles of learning. If they share the same experiences with their friends, the “below average” students can be benefitted and it can also be helpful for the teachers. This performance of the students help the teacher to incorporate different student- centered techniques within the same classroom. Hence, the students don’t need to depend entirely on the teachers for learning as their classmates, too, prove to be facilitators in the same process of learning. This, eventually, raises a platform for English language teachers to implement numerous teaching techniques, approaches, interaction patterns and learning tasks thereby lending more opportunities to the English language learners.

Mixed ability classes pose a considerable challenge. While facing these problems, we, as teachers, need to develop new ideas and become more creative in our teaching techniques to develop our professional skills. These types of classroom situations provide opportunities to develop the vital skills of facing problems, where sometimes, we get new ideas from our learners as well.

Most of the teachers are worried about having mixed ability students in the same classroom because if there is variety in the classroom, it becomes difficult for the teachers to implement their lesson plan effectively since the teachers need to take care of each student individually. It becomes equally difficult for the students as those who understand easily feel bored with more explanations and elaboration, but the same process turns out to be essential for other students. In such a scenario, Hess (2001) has depicted some challenges that a teacher faces in a mixed level classroom:

- We often feel out of control
- In large class we sometimes feel trapped in the problems
- It is difficult to provide for individual learning style
- Activating the quiet student is difficult (Hess, 4-6).

Thus, as Hess opines, the teacher often gets less impactful in a multilevel classroom. The most challenging job for the ELT teachers in such classrooms is to guide students according to their aptitude coupled up with an impartial management of the class and correct assessment of their assignments. We, as teachers, often find that in such classes active students are always proactive, whereas the passive ones dumbly sit in their own shells, if the teacher doesn’t pay equal attention to them. Considering the mixed abilities of the learners, it becomes rather tricky for the facilitator as “only” one method doesn’t suffice the purpose prompting the ELT teachers to implement varied techniques in accordance to their individual needs. Teachers in such type of classrooms should monitor multiple activities simultaneously by guiding the students in specific directions for the learning process. Such a teacher must involve oneself in proactive teaching rather than being reactive. A good teacher promotes conversations within students, classroom discussions, student assignments, observation and formal assessment to gather a little more insight about which technique

works for each learner. What the teacher learns becomes a catalyst for crafting instruction in ways that help each student make the most of one's aptitude. Hence the assessment should not be confined only at the end of a unit/lesson rather should be a continuous process.

Let us now discuss a few strategies to cope with such situations. In order to deal with such type of classes, the teachers should reinvent strategies that can be helpful for all types of learners of the classroom. For example, audio-visual aids turn out to be an interesting tool for all the learners. Copur, in his article entitled '*Coping with the problems of mixed ability classes*' puts forward these points for our perusal, "appeal to all senses, contingency plans, in-class activity, open ended plans, personalizing the tasks, games, competitions and dramatization, extra homework, portfolios, group-work activities, Self-access centers".

Seconding the same conception, Sharma (2006) in her article entitled "*Ways of Effective Language Teaching in Heterogeneous Class*" depicts the methodology of effective classes in heterogeneous classes or classes having mixed level learners as, "planning, teacher's leadership, communication, the well managed classroom, voice, effective presentation, pause and pacing, chunking, verbal aspect, visual, student's participation, positioning, posturing and movement, movements, eye contact, gestures, use of teaching aids, and evaluation".(115-118). Hence, the above mentioned points provide a ready "reconer" to deal with mixed level classrooms. If ELT teachers are able to bring in variety in the class, the chance of being out of track in the classroom decreases. Using different teaching aids in the classroom motivate all the learners and this continuous evaluation of the students helps the teacher to identify substandard learners and work upon them.

V. Rema, in her article published in an international journal delineates a few techniques to ensure effective learning and teaching in such classes as follows:

- create conditions which motivate all pupils to make sustained progress in learning within a common curriculum framework;
- be flexible in responding to pupils' academic, personal and social development;
- make it clear that the achievements and progress of each pupil are valued;
- promote teaching which builds on the prior learning and attainments of pupils;
- free teachers to spend most of their time on direct teaching and enable pupils to work effectively on challenging tasks
- be feasible and appropriate in terms of expectations of teachers and pupils. (Rema, 84)

The sole responsibility lies on the role of a teacher to make the essential adaptations and adjustments to be able to meet the diverse needs of the pupils in the mixed ability classroom. Implementing proper practices, an all-inclusive curriculum, a multicultural approach and assignments assigned to the students are a few steps to ensure improvement of the learner in these mixed ability classes. The support of the parents and the peers is also equally important in ensuring that the teacher is able to meet the diverse requirements of the students.

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