

Teachers' Perceptions toward Teaching English in Mixed- Ability classrooms at the Secondary Level of Education in Bangladesh

Thaniyatul Jannath Samira^{1*}, Naiem Al Amin¹, Khan Sarfaraz Ali², Ida Hindarsah³

¹Institute of Skill Development and Continuing Education, State University of Bangladesh,
Dhaka, Bangladesh

²Faculty of Business, INTI International University, Malaysia,

³Universitas Pasundan, Bandung, Indonesia

Email: thaniyatuljannath850@gmail.com*, khan.sarfarazali@newinti.edu.my,
ida.hindarsah@unpas.ac

Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative study examining secondary school teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward teaching English in mixed-ability classrooms in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The study's primary objective was to identify the challenges English teachers face when instructing students with varying levels of proficiency and to propose strategies for more inclusive and effective teaching practices. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Ten English language teachers five from each of two secondary schools were interviewed using open-ended questions, and six classroom observations were conducted, each involving approximately fifty students. The observations aimed to explore teachers' psychological attributes, tolerance, and adaptive strategies in managing diverse learning needs, as well as patterns of student participation. Thematic analysis revealed key challenges related to differentiated instruction, classroom management, and assessment fairness. However, teachers also demonstrated creativity and resilience in employing learner-centered techniques to foster inclusion. Aligned with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), this study highlights the importance of supporting teachers through professional development and policy initiatives that promote inclusive pedagogies and equitable access to English language learning in mixed-ability classrooms.

Keywords

Mixed-Ability Classrooms, Secondary Education, Teachers' Perceptions, Inclusive Pedagogy, SDG 4, SDG 10

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Introduction

It is indisputable that educators serve a key role in facilitating student accomplishment in learning a second language. Over decades, agents of second language education continue to revise their approaches and tactics in response to a globalizing and changing world. Since improving English teaching is not an easy endeavor, there is always space for improvement in the methodology and classroom tools that are used. Teaching mixed ability classes can be quite difficult and demanding, since it requires careful consideration of a variety of learning styles and abilities, according to actual English language teaching practice. Additionally, it is asserted that students' evolution rates will always be at varying levels due to differences in teaching strategies, resources, and learning preferences, even if classes are put together based on SSC grades.

Teaching English in mixed-ability classrooms provides special instructional difficulties that require teachers to be flexible in a constant awareness of learners' diversity and flexible instructional approaches. (Ur, 2009), states that mixed-ability class includes students of various intellect levels, levels of experience, and learning preferences. Teaching in such a context is challenging and demanding for less experienced teachers because of students' varying competence, knowledge, linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds, learning styles and inadequate physical facilities of the class. Although it has some opportunities, teaching mixed-ability classes is one of the most difficult tasks. Individual and group of diversity, teachers' preparation, seating arrangement, motivation and focusing on fundamental English skills are the most important factors about mixed ability classroom practice that effectively helps students to learn English (Subaiei, 2017). There is no proper way to design a classroom that is effectively differentiated. As a result, it is preferable to accept the diversity of learners and plan the lessons according to each student's needs for the best learning because learners can be diverse based on a wide range of factors (Tomlinson, 1999).

When working with mixed-ability classrooms, teachers must balance instructional pacing and attention when working among students with different abilities, keeping all learners engaged and supported. According to Ansari (2013), when a teacher tries to explain things in greater detail to students who have a moderate to poor ability to absorb information, the student of fast learner is to understand become bored. The hardest part of teaching English in a mixed-ability class is being expected to help students at their respective schedule, regardless of skill disparities (Hedge, 2000).

A group of students with varying levels of aptitude, as shown by their motivation levels, learning preferences, and Language Aptitudes. Although most classes have a mixture of learners' abilities, when the gap widens, it may have an impact on the environment and management of the classroom (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). According to Nelson's (1995) report, children who were placed in cooperative learning groups with mixed ability levels as opposed to identical ability levels improved skills in creative abilities, pleasant social connections, and the capacity for critical thought. Fisher (2014) says a lot of students fall short of their potential because they are instructed to "make a journey", but they have no map. Teachers should give equal priority towards each and every student in the class (NCTB, 1996).

The planning of the class and the homework can consume excess of the teacher's time, and content that is set for the students is typically either too difficult. This could make the teacher feel overburdened by the students (Hess, 2001). Every student learns differently, and the less capable ones presumably find it more difficult to concentrate in a noisy environment (Thompson & Kelly, 1975). The amount of competence and ability of each student is not taken into account when randomly arranging students. This presents a number of difficulties for the teachers who work hard to provide each student in the class with an equal opportunity (Boaler, 2008).

Teachers use Bangla (L1) when they feel it is necessary, particularly when explaining concepts, correcting mistakes, and providing clear directions. Even in English-medium institutions, teachers use students' first languages in many events and scenarios to facilitate learning and improve comprehension (Turin, 2014). In a mixed-ability classroom in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Nusrat (2017) looked at how to overcome the difficulties that were there. This study shows that language teachers must always have mixed-ability classes. Since no aptitude categorization is ever completely accurate, it is almost impossible to have a homogeneous classroom. To ensure that everyone learns effectively, it is preferable to acknowledge reality and implement certain tactics. Teachers must create course materials that allow for the best learning opportunities for both higher ability and lower ability students in order to overcome the challenges of mixed ability classrooms. To ensure that every student is successful and comfortable for at least part of every class period, teachers might employ a range of approaches, grouping strategies, and self-assessment items. Effective learning for all students should be possible if they are all motivated and interested in at least some of the topics or activities taught in class (Cathy & Terrill, 1995). Tomlinson (1999) asserts that the setting, curriculum, and teaching play crucial roles in a language classroom to ensure that every type of student learns well. Students should feel embraced and valued in a classroom setting for their individuality. They must view the classroom as a secure space where they can verbalize their ideas and opinions without fear or reluctance if they want to learn best.

Therefore, the major goals of this study are to understand the perspectives of Bangladeshi teachers on mixed-ability classrooms—both positive and negative—to be aware of the challenges and to identify the remedies. Additionally, while upholding equality between strong and weak students in mixed-ability classes, discussion should focus on the role of teachers in inspiring all students' interest in learning, creativity, and application of higher skills with the aid of a suitable syllabus in accordance with secondary Bangladesh education policy regulations. The following three research questions are included in the study:

- a) What are the perceptions of English teachers towards teaching English in mixed ability classroom?
- b) What are the challenges impeded by the English teachers in teaching English in mixed ability classroom at secondary level?
- c) How will English language teachers overcome the problem of mixed ability classrooms at the secondary level?

Mixed ability classes cannot be considered equivalent by teachers working unilaterally. This research reveals that teachers use a variety of methods to facilitate learning for mixed-ability students, including combining weak and meritorious students in the classroom, using Bengali to facilitate comprehension, and providing an adequate quantity of class work. The teacher and the students can both benefit from adopting the appropriate strategies into practice.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis to explore teachers' perceptions of teaching English in mixed-ability classrooms. Two English-version secondary schools were purposefully selected in Dhaka city, where data were collected from ten English teachers (six male and four female) with B.Ed. or M.Ed. degrees who participated in semi-structured interviews and six classroom observations of 40-50 students each. The interviews lasted for 20-30 minutes and were audio-recorded with the teachers' consent. The observational checklist

for classroom observations and relevant academic articles were used to triangulate the data to enhance reliability.

Result and discussion

Findings from the Interview

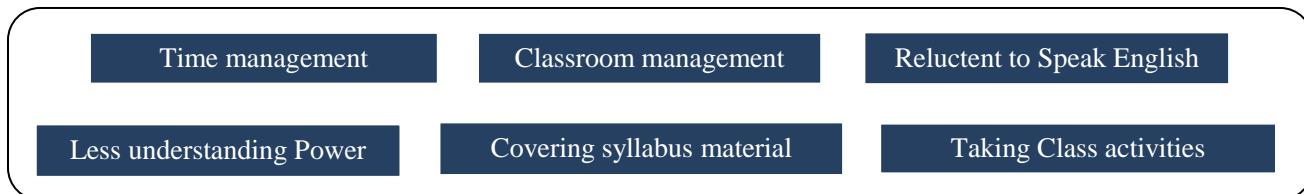


Figure-1: Findings of challenges in mixed-ability classroom

The responses from the interview demonstrated that every teacher experienced difficulties in the mixed-ability classroom. Each class contained two distinct types of students. One is extra meritorious, and the other is weaker. In the mixed- ability class, the main issue is to manage the class within allotted time. The following themes emerged from their statements:

Time Management

Almost every teacher faces difficulty maintaining the lesson schedule and covering the syllabus within limited class time. Teachers stated that they could not use materials properly or complete their planned lessons because slower learners required extra attention.

“Sometimes I cannot use my materials properly or provide any visual presentation because of insufficient class management. I often face difficulties in executing my preplanned lesson plan fully.”

Classroom Management

Teachers reported that managing large, diverse groups was difficult. Students were divided into two groups- one highly motivated and quick, and the other weak and less confident. The seating arrangement also affected interaction, as weaker students sat at the back and often disrupted class discipline.

“If I spend too much time explaining to the less meritorious students, the more capable ones get bored. The lesson is disrupted when the weaker students sit in the back because sometime they talk continuously”

To overcome this, teachers mentioned using L1 (Bangla) for clarification and forming mixed-ability groups where possible. Among all teachers, 6 teachers used L1 for understanding, while other preferred English with easy vocabularies and examples.

Reluctance to Speak English

Teachers noticed that many students showed a lack of willingness to speak English during the lesson; they were either not confident or worried about making mistakes. This inhibited oral participation in class and impeded progress. The teachers' endeavors to address this included conducting group tasks, practices in speaking, and an occasional surprise test; it was noted that students responded well.

“Changing teaching mood helps me to draw attention quickly. Some changes like, assigning group tasks, surprise test, speaking practice with me or in pair to overcome reluctance to speak English.”

Teachers recommend improving teaching skills, practicing all four English skills, forming mixed-ability groups, and receiving targeted teacher training. They also encourage students to read newspapers, English books, and watch English movies or TV news to enhance fluency.

Covering Syllabus Material

Because of the significant ability gap and class size, completing the prescribed syllabus was a challenge. Teachers reported that when trying to support weaker students, the pace of the lesson slowed, and they had less time for other activities.

“Difficulties with class management and covering syllabus material... If I spend too much time explaining to weaker students, the more capable ones get bored.”

Conducting Class Activities

Many teachers said that class activities were limited because of time and management problems. Some teachers followed the CLT* method as instructed by NCTB*, others used GTM* and DM* depending on the situation. Most teachers did not conduct group work regularly, though they recognized its importance.

“We try to engage with students with the task of writing. It’s less and we won’t be able to engage the students in any group activity. Less interaction of weaker students had been observed it can be seen as psychological barrier also, like, Fear of lowered performance, cognitive dissonance, idea mismatch etc.”

Assessment Practices

Teachers shared they incorporated flexible assessments for all levels of ability, usually based on the National Curriculum. Only one teacher conducted pre- and post-tests to measure student improvement.

Teachers’ Motivation

Teaching in classes with mixed-ability students reduced the motivation of teachers in some cases because teachers could not get through their lesson or use new teaching tools. Regardless, teachers conveyed that they genuinely care for their students' achievements and need to be continually learning professionally.

“In my field, I have done lots of microteaching and explored different type of teaching methodologies, but when it’s about focusing on each student individually - it’s like more difficult to apply those techniques. In consequence, I often have to go with traditional teaching style.”

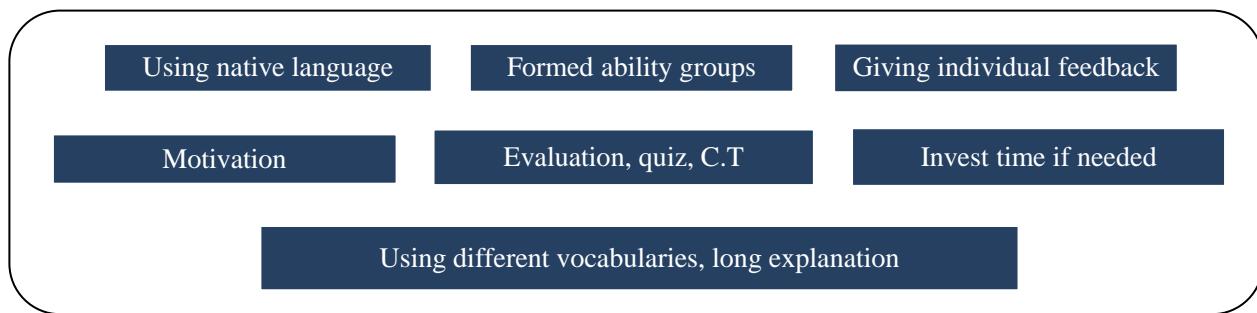


Figure-2: Findings of Strategy to Overcome the Challenges

Findings from the Class Observation

Classroom observations indicate that teaching mixed-ability classes poses difficult challenges for all teachers. Not all teachers demonstrated strategies equally well for learners with different ability levels even through the educational policy of the CLT method. Some educators consider the traditional GTM fashionable if students are weaker while learners who are higher achieve through self-interest with little or no development. Observations never recorded any mixed-ability grouping, and all assessments were drawn from classwork and homework. The practical and usable English of learners was negligible, there were forms of materials, and teachers motivating all learners was limited.

Most classrooms observed were large, forty to fifty students, and it was difficult for teachers to monitor students individually and create an opportunity for each student to engage with classmates, and eliciting student interaction in some classes was difficult even when observing groups of students working together. In many cases lesson planning appeared weak.

CLT = Communicative Language Teaching; DM* = Direct Method; GTM* = Grammar Translation Method
NCTB* = National Curriculum & Textbook Board*

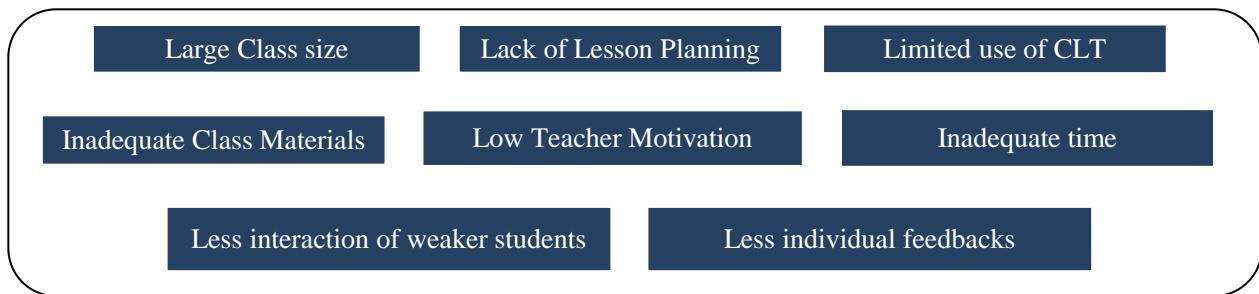


Figure-3: Findings from Class Observation

The viability of providing students somebody to formally interact with was restrictive due to the lack of resources, while grouping activity was not sufficiently evident. Teachers made attempts to cope with multiple and interrelated challenges by moving into Bangla to explain as in being verbal clarification for an extended period of time, assigning more homework, and providing an individual extension of feedback to distract students and have a common comprehension. Though, these coping strategies were short-lived and were teacher-centered and focused on maintaining control of the classroom and not enhancing transactional communication competence.

In summary, the observation suggests that teachers need to train in the structured CLT approach, with smaller classes and better resources to enable teachers to meet the diverse needs of their learners in a mixed-ability classroom environment.

Conclusion

The results of the interview and classroom observation are somewhat inconsistent. According to the interview's findings, experienced English teachers perceive a variety of challenges while taking the classes, including time management, class management, students' reluctance to speak English, low comprehension and ability, managing the secondary curriculum's syllabus according to students' proficiency, and assigning tasks effectively to mixed-ability students. They implement various tactics to overcome these challenges, such as grouping students by ability, providing instant feedback, customizing needs, motivating students, conducting class assessments, and occasionally using English vocabulary and in-depth explanations instead of the native language. The teacher also offers pleasant solutions to students' errors. From classroom observations, it was noted that there were no grouping activities, making it difficult to give equal attention to each student, and time management was poor.

Training and preparation in dealing with diversity will be necessary for effective English teaching in mixed-ability settings. Selecting appropriate content and considering the most effective strategies for the following would need to happen: Positive motivation and visual aids, propriety-considered grouping, and tasks that incorporate all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing would all contribute to ensuring that equal participation and learning takes place throughout the group.

Future studies need to examine novel ways of teaching mixed-ability classrooms with an emphasis on the use of technology, differentiation, and motivation to address the needs of different learners. They also need to investigate how positive interactions with the teacher over time affect language development. Finally, the examination of how secondary-level interventions create lasting results to improve student performance could provide useful implications towards curriculum improvement and policy planning in English Language education.

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