Mixed-Ability in EFL Crowded Classes (Problems and Solutions):

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Abstract:

This study aims to demonstrate the reflection of student variation, as a result of congestion in English classes, and its reflection on pupils' abilities and performance of the language, and to find ways. The occasion that teachers of English as a foreign language must follow so that they can reach all students with a low and advanced level. And we say: English as a foreign language classes, particularly in busy classes, represent a heterogeneous mix of pupils, who differ in many ways, such as their interests, needs and mental abilities; This variation has led to the emergence of so-called heterogeneous or heterogeneous classes, and has motivated many researchers to research and verify appropriate ways to deal with multi-capacity classes. To study this issue, the study followed the analytical descriptive approach. The required data was collected by resolution. A sample was formed.The study was conducted by thirty teachers from the base level in Al - Haqqa, the state of Al Jazeera. The data were collected and analysed using the Social Sciences Statistical Packages Programme (SPSS). The difference of students in classes in English as a foreign language may be an impediment, resulting in undesirable results. environmental and genetic or inherited differences. The study recommends that teach-

ers of English as a foreign language pay attention to the differences between pupils in large classes and seek appropriate ways to manage the classroom and achieve the desired educational goals. Keywords: Multi-capacity classes, crowded, large classes, different.

مستخلص :

تهدف هـذه الدراسـة لإثبـات الانعـكاس الـذي أدى إليـه تبايـن الطـلاب ، نتيجـة الازدحـام في فصـول تعليـم اللغـة الإنجليزيـة ، وعـلى انعكاسـه عـلى قـدرات التلاميـذ و أدائهـم للغـة، كـما تهدف إلى إيجـاد الطـرق. المناسبة التـي يجـب أن يتبعهـا معلمـو اللغـة الإنجليزيـة كلغـة أجنبيـة حتـى تمكنهـم مـن الوصـول لـكل التلاميـذ ذوي المسـتوى الضعيـف و المتقـدم .

ونقـول: إن فصـول تعليـم اللغـة الانجليزيـة كلغـة أجنبيـة و بصفـة خاصـة في الفصـول المزدحمـة تمثـل خليـط غـير متجانـس مـن التلاميـذ, يختلـف هـؤلاء التلاميـذ في نـواح عـدة ، كاختـلاف اهتماماتهـم واحتياجاتهـم وقدراتهـم العقليـة ؛ أدى هـذا التبايـن إلى ظهـور مـا يسـمى بالفصـول متعـددة المقـدرات أو الفصـول غـير المتجانسـة, كـما حفـز عديـد مـن الباحثـين للبحـث و للتحقـق مـن الطـرق المناسبـة للتعامـل مـع الفصـول متعـددة القـدرات. ولـدرس هـذه القضيـة اتبعـت الدراسـة المنهـج الوصفـي التحليلـي, تـم جمـع البيانـات المطلوبـة بواسطـة الاستبانة, تكونـت عينـة الدراسـة مـن ثلاثـين معلـم مـن معلمـي مرحلـة الأسـاس بمحليـة الحصاحيصـا, ولايـة الجزيـرة. تـم جمـع و تحليـل البيانـات باسـتخدام برنامـج الحـزم الإحصائيـة للعلـوم الاجتماعيـة .(SPSS) توصلـت الدراسـة إلى نتائـج عـدة أهمهـا: أن اختـلاف الطـلاب في فصـول تعليـم اللغـة الانجليزيـة كلغـة أجنبيـة قـد يشـكل عائقـا مـما يـؤدي إلى نتائـج غـير مرغوبـة, يمكـن تصنيـف اختلافـات الطـلاب عـلى نوعـين مـن الاختلافـات: اختلافـات بيئيـة و اختلافـات جينيـة أو موروثـة. تـوصي الدراسـة معلمـي اللغـة الإنجليزيـة كلغـة أجنبيـة بالانتبـاه للاختلافـات بـين التلاميـذ في الفصـول الكبـيرة والسـعي لإيجـاد الطـرق المناسبـة لإدارة الفصـل و تحقيـق الأهـداف التعليميـة المرجـوة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فصول متعددة قدرات, مزدحمة, فصول الكبيرة, اختلاف

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 a 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 the individual differences between them, their ages, in-

tellect and their ability to learn...etc. , all that cause problems for 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.

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 a short time, accordingly they neglect the students who have less abilities or learning difficulties. This negligence is a big mistake and has a serious effect on students learning of the EFL

Objectives of the Study

This study is aimed at achieving the following objectives: to prove that the diversity in EFL students' ability is reflected in their competence and performance of the language. to investigate and find special techniques to be followed by EFL teachers in order to reach both weak and advanced learners.

Questions of the Study:

The questions of the study are:To what extent does the diversity in students' abilities affect teaching and learning EFL basic skills and reflected in students' performance? 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?

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.

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.

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 experiences. Psychology offers its expla-

nation 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.

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''.

Some Problems in the Mixed Ability Classes

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

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 to 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.

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.

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

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.

Competitive Activities

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

Since the competitions are usually connected with the knowledge of the subject in question, 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 leveland 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" .

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 at 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 an 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 un-

doubtedly 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.

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.

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.

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.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive analytical method, a questionnaire used for data collection from thirty (30) EFL Teachers at Basic Schools from Al Hasahisa 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

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

Where

r = correlation

R: Reliability of the test

N: number of all items in the test

X: odd scores

Y: even scores

Σ: Sum

R   2×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

Val = $\sqrt{0.89}$ Validity   = 0.94

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After collecting the required data by the mean of questionnaire this part represents the process of the statistical analysis provided with the discussion for the responses.

Table1\ EFL students vary in many dimensions such as their intelligence, needs, academic readiness …etc.

	T	%
Agree	30	100.0
To some extent	0	00.0
Dis-agree	0	00.0
	30	100%

Table.1 gives the following responses: 100% Agreed with the statement and 00.0% to some extent while 00.0% disagreed. The statement EFL students vary in many dimensions such as their intelligence, needs, academic readiness …etc is accepted by the whole of the selected sample members.

Table 2: Students' diversity may have a negative effect on student's performance

	T	%
Agree	22	73.3
To some extent	6	20.0
Dis-agree	2	6.7
	30	100%

According to the statistical analysis of the statement(2) in table 2 most of the respondents 73.3% Agreed that Students' diversity may have a negative effect on students' performance , and 20% to some extent while 6.7% disagreed. Thus this state-ment is accepted.

Table 3: Teaching mixed ability classes is a complicated process that needs a well-trained teacher

	T	%
Agree	28	93.3
To some extent	2	6.7
Dis-agree	0	00.0
	30	100%

According to the statistical analysis of the previous statement it was indicated that most of the respondents 93.3% Agreed that Teaching mixed ability classes is a complicated process that needs a well-trained teacher, and 06.7% to some extent while 00.0%

disagreed. Thus this statement is accepted.

Table 4: EFL syllabus designers should avoid (one size fits all) and put students' differences into account

	T	%
Agree	22	73.3
To some extent	6	20.0
Dis-agree	2	6.7
	30	100%

The statistical analysis of the previous statement indicates that most of the respondents 73.3% Agreed that EFL syllabus designers should avoid (one size fits all) and put students' differences into account, and 20% to some extent while 06.7% disagreed. Thus this statement is accepted.

Table 5: Using ICTs and modern technologies in EFL classes can help in grasping attention particularly in crowded classes

	T	%
Agree	30	100.0
To some extent	0	00.0
Dis-agree	0	00.0
	30	100%

Table 5 gives the following responses: 100% Agree with the statement and 00.0% to some extent while 00.0% disagree. The sentence is accepted by the whole of the selected sample members.

Table 6: Positive reinforcement ensures students' learning experiences

	T	%
Agree	24	80.0
To some extent	6	20.0
Dis-agree	0	00.0
	30	100%

According to the statistical analysis of (statement 9); 80% Agreed with the statement and 20% to some extent while 00.0% disagreed. According to the result the statement is accepted by the majority of the teachers, so it's proved that Positive reinforcement ensures students' learning experiences.

Table 7: Pair and group work give student the chance to interact and develop their abilities despite their different levels

	T	%
Agree	26	86.7
To some extent	2	6.7
Dis-agree	2	6.7
	30	100%

Table 7 gives the following responses: 86.7% Agreed with the statement and 7.7% to some extent while 7.7% disagreed. The sentence is accepted by the majority of the selected sample members.

Table 8: Variation in materials fulfills the needs of both good and struggling students

	T	%
Agree	28	93.3
To some extent	0	00.0
Dis-agree	28	6.7
	30	100%

Table 8 gave the following responses: 93.3% Agree with the statement and 00.0% to some extent while 06.7% disagree. The sentence is accepted by the majority of the selected sample members.

Table 9: Competitive activities increase students' interest in participation

	T	%
Agree	26	86.7
To some extent	4	13.3
Dis-agree	0	00.0
	30	100%

According to the statistical analysis of (statement 14); 86.7% Agreed with the statement and 13.3% to some extent while 00.0% disagreed. According to the result the statement is accepted by the majority of the teachers, so it's proved that Competitive activities increase students' interest in participation

Table 10: Parents play a prominent role in motivating and raise their interest to learn English

	T	%
Agree	26	86.7
To some extent	0	00.0
Dis-agree	4	13.3
	30	100%

According to the statistical analysis of (statement 12); 86.7% Agreed with the statement and 00.0% to some extent while 13.6% disagreed. According to the result the statement is accepted by the majority of the teachers, so its proved that Parents play a prominent role in motivating and raise their interest to learn English

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:

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.

 Students' differences can be classified under two main categories, environmental differences or genetic differences.

 Student centered approach for teaching foreign language gives EFL students a good opportunity to use the language.

 Using modern technologies (ICTs) engage students in the lessons and motivate them.

Recommendations

 EFL should 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.

 EFL classes should be well equipped and ready with different facilities.

 Teachers should continuously praise and positive reinforcement encourage both weak and advanced learners for better performance.

 Individual differences need to be assessed in order to be taken into account.

 To adequately address individual differences, teachers should have a way to characterize students in a scientifically valid way.

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