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PEDAGOGY AT FLUX: CHALLENGES FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN A MIXED-ABILITY CLASS

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate teachers' perceptions regarding how they meet students' needs in a mixed-ability context as it involves various pedagogical challenges for language teachers while teaching students of various proficiency levels in heterogeneous groups. Tomlinson's (2001) framework is utilized for this research. Teachers aim to reach all the students by monitoring them in a variety of ways to achieve effective teaching. This study adopts a qualitative and quantitative research design to investigate the challenges faced by language teachers in mixed-ability classes. The participants of this study are language teachers and learners at three language institutes in Sukkur, Pakistan. Purposeful sampling was used to achieve participants' diversity in terms of gender, years of teaching experience, and educational qualification. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with language teachers to explore their perceptions regarding the challenges faced in mixed-ability classes. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the participants and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. Classroom observation was conducted to witness the teaching practices, teachers' class management, and teacher-student interactions. This research sheds light on the variety of challenges that language teachers face while teaching mixed-ability classes; these challenges encompass students' individual needs and requirements as well as the necessity to create a supportive and inclusive environment. Our findings reveal that varied instruction is the best way to meet all pupils' needs and use additional material for both advanced and average learners.

Keywords: Perceptions, Transcribed, Diversity, Experience, Gender

Introduction

In recent years, the issue of mixed-ability classes has attracted considerable attention in modern education. While the desire to include students of different cognitive abilities in one group is driven by the increasing focus on equality and inclusivity, this educational arrangement poses challenges to teaching and learning (Tomlinson, 2001). The concept of mixed-ability class centers on the idea of bringing together students of different proficiency levels, skills, and learning needs. Thus, teachers not only have to bring diverse students together but also devise teaching strategies to cater to their diverse backgrounds (Hall & Harding, 2003). For that reason, mixed-ability grouping has been a subject of academic debate. While many proponents argue for the inclusivity and diversity it brings, many critics note the negative impact on teaching and learning outcomes. For language education, the concept of mixed-ability classes is particularly challenging. Since learning a language is a high-order cognitive task influenced by individual differences, students of different ability levels have to be taught differently (Ellis, 2008). Thus, language teachers are expected to offer language learners content according to their needs within the same classroom. The academic literature reports several specific challenges teachers face in mixed-ability language classes, such as differentiated instruction and classroom management problems (Cummins, 2000; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). Furthermore, the mixed-ability nature of a typical language class challenges traditional teaching paradigms based on homogeneous grouping and a one-size-fits-all approach (Nunan, 2003). Thus, this study aims to shed light on the nuances of pedagogy in the mixed-ability language classroom. (Ortiz, Hernandez, et. al. 2023), The research is designed to explore multiple dimensions of this issue to offer a comprehensive

understanding of teaching in the class with students of different proficiency levels.

Problem Statement

Language teachers working with students in mixed-ability classes in Sukkur, face various pedagogical issues while trying to reach all learners in a class. These challenges involve difficulties with differentiated instruction, management of classroom environment and interactions, and meeting the needs of each learner. It is difficult to develop efficient interventions and support to improve the quality of language teaching in mixed-ability classes in Sukkur. Therefore, an in-depth study of the pedagogical dynamics of the practice is demanded to identify and address the most pressing issues faced by language teachers in Sukkur and enhance student outcomes.

Objective of the Study

- To investigate the perceptions of language teachers in Sukkur regarding the challenges they face when teaching mixed-ability students in language classes.
- To identify the strategies utilized by language teachers in Sukkur to address and mitigate pedagogical challenges encountered when teaching mixed-ability students in language classes.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of language teachers in Sukkur on challenges in teaching mixed abilities in language classes?
2. What are the strategies employed by language teachers in Sukkur to overcome pedagogical challenges in mixed abilities in language classes?

Literature Review

However, there are a plethora of issues that language teachers in a mixed environment may face. For example, Hussain mentions that teachers are typically forced to conduct extra classes for students with poor proficiency in English. (Van, Gotch, et. al. 2024), Although some reports claim that schools simply are not ready for such educational technology, others emphasize that the advent of diversified

education that informs the differentiation practice triggered the need for teachers to undergo professional growth: That is what makes a classroom successful: "... students coming together to study in small groups, conferring with the entire constituency. Or people going to learn. Come back to share their findings and plan their additional inquiries; then come back for more. Coming back together to do, make, share, analyze it, and more." (Aman, Muhammad, et. al. 2023), It is the same when a teacher passes the instruction to the different semesters and single-vision classes. The only difference is that the teacher plans the lessons after, and then they see the students' reactions. Teachers know how to grab the students' attention so they use different pedagogical approaches in such contexts. In this way, in the differentiated classroom, teachers are not overcome and excited, but they are willing to learn for the varied. (Aslam, Khan, et. al. 2023), So, in these ways, Tomlinson wants the teachers, but it is what you want to lead them. Teachers monitor how students perform, what part of the struggle is, who gets bored, and who gets help. The teacher collects information about them that will be useful for assignments; they can improve their classes. This is a different way of learning about students, following different educational principles: giving students a choice. Teachers need to encourage struggling learners and achieve linguistic competence. They must refrain from performing specific tasks they cannot perform. This can lead to a lack of motivation to do something about the subject and their point of ability, which is the best way to get to know them. We allow it to be used to help students overcome their problems. (Sarwar, Khurram, 2023) Often, adapt to disciplinary tactics and reject teachers until they manage themselves, they already have negative experiences, and have much to depend on. It is easy for teachers to abandon and maintain a close relationship with a student as a teacher. (Tong, Yu, Deacon, et. al.

2024), However, if we aim to help the student, we need to tackle this simple task of preventing the student from accepting all kinds of combat methods and not letting them go but achieving the best performance. Language teachers around the world regularly encounter numerous challenges in their classrooms, especially considering students' contrasting levels of proficiency (Hall, 2016). The present literature review aims to identify the most common challenges faced by language teachers working in mixed-ability classes in Sukkur, Pakistan. In mixed-ability classrooms, language teachers need to address diverse learning needs, students with lower proficiency levels, and high achievers (Ali, 2019). Most language teachers in Sukkur struggle with constrained resources outdated textbooks, inadequate teaching aids, and overcrowded classrooms. Thus, they face difficulties with differentiation and offering high-quality education to students with different abilities. In such multilingual settings as Sukkur, where pupils have different first languages, language barriers are an issue for many language teachers. They must focus on overcoming language diversity to provide everyone with equal learning opportunities. Teachers can handle mixed-ability classes with the right classroom-management skills to create a supportive, full-bearing environment. Teachers should find a balance between low and high achievers to ensure they do not get distracted while trying to create a safe environment for all students. (Asal, Yousuf, et. al, 2023), Teachers may face issues that concern the fair assessment of all the students due to various factors such as their proficiency levels, learning styles, and assessment tools available to them. This problem needs a manifold of strategies: types of assessment, formative assessment, and techniques that replace or complement traditional assessment. Besides, the aspect of continuous professional development plays a crucial role in helping manage mixed-ability classrooms. It

is essential to provide teachers with growth opportunities consistently as the complexities of mixed-ability groups are relatively high. (Tahira, Muhammad, Asma, 2023), There are multiple challenges faced by English teachers in dealing with mixed-ability classes in Sukkur-Pakistan. They include learning needs, resources, language problems, classroom management skills, assessment and evaluation issues, and needs for professional development. Such difficulties are discussed at three levels: teacher training, adequate resource provision, and policy context to ensure better-quality education.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative and investigates the challenges faced by language teachers in mixed-ability classes. Qualitative designs are appropriate for exploring complex phenomena and understanding teachers' lived experiences and perceptions deeply. The participants of this study are language teachers currently teaching mixed-ability classes at language institutes in Sukkur, Pakistan. Purposeful sampling was used to achieve participants' diversity in terms of gender, years of teaching experience, and educational qualification. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with language teachers to explore their perceptions regarding the challenges faced in mixed-ability classes.] Classroom observation was conducted to witness the teaching practices, teachers' class management, and teacher-student interactions.

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire's first construct item sought to measure one of the main challenges teachers face when teaching students of mixed ability. More precisely, this section addressed the first three subcategories listed in the methodology: teaching and learning, motivation, and materials. It thus addressed the classroom setting, with the performers presenting their teaching styles and the students' responsiveness, lacking motivation

in this case. The results offer Mean and St.D of the challenges teachers face in dealing with students of mixed ability, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Challenges faced by instructors in mixed-ability

Category	Mean	St.D
Teaching and learning	3.10	0.47
Motivation	3.12	0.62
Materials	2.82	0.65
ALL	3.02	0.42

Table 1 reveals that a significant share of difficulties is faced by educators in providing instruction to mixed-ability classes with the overall mean being 3.10. Meanwhile, motivation challenges are close to the top with a mean of 3.12, while problems with material utilization are rated third with 2.82. Therefore, the obtained results show that there are numerous difficulties that an instructor may face in terms of teaching and learning as well as motivation. On the one hand, the derived outcomes demonstrate that the mixed-ability classes teachers work in are associated with problems, which is consistent with numerous studies showing the implications of such classes on the teaching process. Thus, teachers are unable to approach each student because students' learning needs differ. As a result, students may also vary in terms of attitudes to learning, motivation, and self-discipline. As such, it is difficult to design lessons that are ideal for students, which can emerge due to the absence of the appropriate teaching skills. The majority of respondents admit that they always feel that their class students are very different in speaking the English language? About 12.5% experienced this, while no one said they have rarely or never dealt with it. Moreover, once again, the majority say that this increases the odds that their students will learn either regular or periodic modes (72.5%), opted activities (90%), and stick with content (80.2%). -Feel the difference.

Table 2. Strategies utilized by instructors in mixed ability classes.

Category	Instructions mean	Std. D
Classroom management	4.75	0.38
Materials	4.23	0.73
Teaching and learning	4.11	0.66
All	4.35	0.52

When asked if they generally talk about their students' mixed abilities, 80% of them always answer often, 12.5% follow it occasionally, and 3% rarely. Other questions about the concept and use of recreational strategies revealed the ability to distinguish most teachers from students when planning activities. 75% are always on the lookout for them, 20% are sometimes on the go, and 5% are rare. However, upon inquiring if they intend to perform diversified actions to accommodate the students' necessities, a low percentage was found. Of these, 65 answered repeatedly and consistently, while 27.50% occasionally and 7.50% seldom or sometimes. They are debating this with many more participants' claims that there is no timeframe to prepare for various activities. The table given below gives perceptions of five groups of language learners regarding the challenges they face in a mixed-ability class at a Language Centre in Sukkur, Pakistan.

Table 3: Learners' perception regarding the challenges they face in a mixed-ability class

Group of Learners	Responses/Perspectives
1. Advanced Learners	"We often feel that the class is going too slow, as it is taught at the pace of the slowest learners. It's annoying not to be able to do more."
2. Intermediate Learners	"We find some topics and vocabulary too difficult for us to understand and keep up with. It's even confusing at times to see the slides experiment without being able to understand."

Group of Learners	Responses/Perspectives
3. Beginner Learners	"We have trouble with some basic concepts and vocabulary, especially when we're rushed through. It's getting tiring to always feel like we're catching up to others."
4. ESL Learners (English as a Second Language)	'As English as a second language learners, we also have the added difficulty of understanding the materials. It seems impossible to fully participate in meaningful discussions and activities.
5. ELL Learners (English Language Learners)	"Our first languages are different, so understanding grammar and pronunciation can be a little confusing. We always feel like we're idiots."

These responses provide insights into the diverse challenges faced by different groups of language learners in a mixed-ability class, highlighting the need for tailored support and instruction to address their unique needs.

Teachers' Response

Teacher-1: "The most challenging aspect of teaching mixed-ability classes, according to teacher A, is meeting the contrasting learning needs. Some students learn concepts fast, while others struggle or need more time. Struggling to overcome the dilemma of challenging advanced students while providing enough support to students who require it is quite discouraging".

Teacher 2: "Within mixed-ability settings, the challenging component is classroom management according to teacher B. Since learners' expertise varies, some students fail to engage fully or get inspired. Continuously attempting to strike a balance between fulfilling the needs of high-achievers and offering supplementary instructions to

underperforming students is quite discouraging". (Thompson, 2024)

Teacher-3: "With parallel experience and levels, the resource limit is by far the most challenging impediment reported by teacher C in the Language Centre. The reason for this is that there are insufficient resources such as materials and facilities to support a diverse environment. It hinders our ability to efficiently identify mixed-ability students".

Teacher-4: "Challenges in mixed-ability classes are cultural and language diversity due to the students' backgrounds. Some students have more or fewer exposures to the target language due to others' variational levels. It is challenging to optimize my communication patterns while keeping cultural respect for accounts".

Teacher-5: "Assessment and evaluation are always a challenging issue in mixed-ability classes because students have different learning styles and language backgrounds. I can't use every traditional type of evaluation to measure all students since some students are opposing personalities with creative styles".

Discussion

About half of the teachers who answer this question say that preliminary tests help them see some areas that need more work in the classroom. Also, most teachers have rated (85%) to examine students before the start of the academic year based on academic results. Interestingly, there is a similar strategy, in which teachers inspect students at the beginning of the school year and reject education in areas where students have demonstrated a high level of expertise) and, neither very friendly nor knowledgeable. For teachers, the strategy is the same, it shows that teachers do not take on much work when learning to do more when they focus on their work and make a difference. (Serafini, Roca, 2024), After looking at these results, one gets the impression that, based on the results, English teachers determine most of the class

as a foreign language and then plan to teach them. Thirty participants answered this question, 17 believed that the reason for the disagreement was inconsistent and 13 of them referred to the cause as "advance information." It seems like these two factors are already connected. Suppose a learner experiences difficulties in the first few years of studying a foreign language and lags after entering a higher level. In that case, his self-esteem decreases which motivates him to learn. (Danzi et al., 2008). What was not discussed in this study is the extent to which teachers' strategies are used. I found that teachers with discrimination training were more the strategy in the second part of the survey, and some were more effectively and effectively meeting different standards. Students have the most freedom of learning. They are also more likely to show that discrimination benefits the weak and all groups of students. (Heinzmann, Koylu, Ehrsam, 2024), However, since open-ended questions were not compulsory, there is a picture of how the training affects middle-class teachers' attitudes. Adam, 2007; Rodriguez, 2011 showed that when teachers are familiar with a particular strategy, it does not mean that they will use it. This could be due to a lack of trust or all the factors that hinder them from implementing discrimination guidelines. Therefore, further research should be done to explore the relationship between topic training and effective classroom strategy use. (Wang, Kruk, 2024) Also, since teachers include factors that prevent them from using discrimination, we recommend that any future studies focus on the factors that influence effective implementation support.

Conclusion

This research on the investigation of the pedagogical challenges faced by language teachers in a mixed-ability classroom at a Language Center in Sukkur, Pakistan, highlighted the complexity of teaching in such diverse multicultural environments. To sum

up, this research has provided insights into the perceptions and strategies of language teachers in Sukkur regarding the challenges and approaches to teaching mixed-ability learners in language classes. Examining the teachers' perspectives and personal experiences indicates that the task of teaching a classroom with a diverse group of students, particularly those with differentiated abilities, is complicated by various factors including the need for individualized instruction, classroom management challenges, and the necessity to ensure that all learners have equal opportunities for success. However, the findings suggest that language teachers in Sukkur utilize a variety of strategies to overcome barriers to achieve an inclusive learning environment. Targeted support was provided through differentiated instruction, student collaboration, peer-assisted learning, flexible grouping, and technology-enhanced learning, among others. Additionally, the need for professional development and other types of support was emphasized by teachers to enable them to better meet the needs of mixed-ability students. Therefore, this research is one more step to making language learning more inclusive and adaptive. (Richardson, Lacroix, 2023)

Recommendations

It is suggested that training should be provided to help teachers handle diversified capability classrooms so that neither the weak nor the healthy students lose the will to achieve goals. On the other hand, more research is required to uncover the full depth and range of numerous issues associated with language pedagogy. Also, research can be based on country-level evaluations across different learning centers to clarify the discrepancies in implementation. Finally, student and administrator perspectives on the issue can provide a fuller understanding of the issues described.

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