

Teaching Mixed-Ability English Classes in Bangladeshi Universities: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

Teaching English in mixed-ability classes in tertiary-level education has been a multifaceted challenge for educators globally. In contexts where learners possess diverse linguistic backgrounds, proficiency levels and learning styles, facilitators often struggle to provide inclusive instructions to ensure an even distribution of education. This research paper presents the findings of a mixed method study, designed to examine both the challenges and the strategies to overcome the hurdles faced in a mixed-ability classroom—from students' perspective. The study systematically examines the aforementioned issues followed by exploring a comprehensive set of pedagogical strategies, e.g., task differentiation, use of technology, peer to peer

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interaction, individual grooming etc., to be employed both by the teachers and students. The findings of the study statistically implicate the effectiveness of the above-mentioned strategies and aims to provide evidence-based guidance, to improve the teaching quality of such a classroom, despite its composite nature.

Keywords: mixed-ability classroom, diverse background, challenges, strategies

Introduction

In tertiary-level education, the task of teaching English poses a multifaceted challenge, resonating globally, yet particularly acutely within the dynamic educational landscape of Bangladeshi universities. Instructors often face pedagogical challenges of effectively catering to ‘mixed-ability classes’ — environments where students exhibit varying levels of English language proficiency. In many educational systems, mixed-ability classrooms are the norm rather than the exception, particularly in contexts where inclusive learning practices are emphasized. According to Richards (1998), "Every class we ever teach is mixed ability". On a similar notion, Moon (2005, p.27) also points out that all classes have (learners) with different abilities and characteristics. Rinvolduceri asserts, "We do not teach a group, but thirty separate people. Because of this, the problem of mixed abilities in the same room seems absolutely natural, and it is the idea of teaching a unitary lesson that seems odd" (1986, p.17). Even if a class appears homogeneous on the first day of a course, by the end of the first week, "patterns and gradations of levels" will begin to appear, according to Wajnryb (1992, p.36).

A mixed-ability classroom (MAC) consists of a group of learners with differences in aptitude, interest and skills. The complexities inherent in mixed-ability classrooms extend beyond mere variations in language proficiency or aptitude; they encompass a wide spectrum of factors such as cultural backgrounds, educational experiences, motivation and a plethora of other criteria. According to Ainslie (1994), mixed-ability classes are where students differ greatly in ability, motivation, needs, interests, educational background, learning styles, age, anxiety, as well as factors like external pressures and time available to study (p.9). Educators are often confronted with students with “different abilities and diverse competencies due to their diverse backgrounds, learning styles, personal traits, goals, and motivations, all grouped in one class” (Altohami et al., 2022, p. 371).

Roberts (2007) provides insights into the multitude of factors influencing the characteristics of learners in mixed-ability classrooms, highlighting age, personality, motivation, educational background, learning styles, and cultural background as some of the pivotal aspects. Age, personality, and motivation are personal attributes that shape students' learning experiences in mixed-ability classrooms, with older students often facing greater difficulty in learning and retaining information than their younger peers. These individual personality traits significantly impact students' participation and engagement in the classroom and their sense of belonging within the learning community. Motivation also plays a vital role in the learner's persistence and classroom contribution. Even though educational background is critical, as students entering mixed-ability classrooms have varied learning modalities and proficiency levels, devising inclusive pedagogic strategies and tailored

approaches to the diverse learning needs of the learners can ensure equitable learning outcomes.

Navigating the intricacies of such educational environments demands a profound understanding of the manifold challenges faced by both educators and learners in a mixed-ability classroom, while not discounting its many benefits. This research paper endeavors to thoroughly investigate the multifaceted challenges inherent in teaching tertiary-level mixed-ability English classes, especially in the Bangladeshi context, and devise pedagogical strategies aimed at minimizing those challenges. The primary objective of this study is to systematically identify and analyze the challenges of a mixed-ability classroom from the vantage point of (tertiary-level Bangladeshi) students, and central to this exploration is an inquiry through a rigorous mixed-method study, aiming to lend a voice to the students to not only inform of the challenges faced by them in such a dynamic educational environment, but also propose alternative strategies to overcome them.

This research paper will aim to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges faced in a mixed-ability English classroom by tertiary-level students in Bangladesh?
2. What are some possible strategies to overcome the challenges faced in a mixed-ability tertiary-level English classroom?

This study will also shed light on prior literature on this topic, informing of the methodology undertaken to collect and analyze the data, as well as the implications of the

collected data. Based on the responses received from the participants, the authors will also propose some pedagogic strategies to overcome the challenges elaborated by the students, supplemented by their (authors') own experiences of teaching in tertiary-level mixed-ability English classes in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

Every learner in a classroom is different and unique, and in that sense, all classrooms are mixed-ability classrooms. “Even when students are placed in classes carefully based on their placement test scores, differences do exist as their progress rates are bound to be at different levels”, Le and Renandya (2016) argue. Ridley (1982) also claims that all teaching in schools is mixed-ability teaching (p.37). In that sense, English language teaching and English classrooms are no different. From having disparate language proficiency levels to varied learning modalities and linguistic diversity, most language classrooms reflect a heterogeneous composition of learners. From negotiating the various complexities arising from diverse linguistic backgrounds to adapting and accommodating to the variegated cognitive and learning styles of learners, educators are often required to encounter a wide spectrum of obstacles in their pedagogical endeavors. In order to foster an environment that is conducive to effective and equitable learning necessitates a concerted and deliberate effort to surmount these hurdles through innovative approaches and proactive maneuvers.

The challenges faced by instructors in a mixed-ability English classroom are manifold. Firstly, the diverse linguistic proficiency levels of students may pose a challenge in a mixed-ability classroom. While high-

proficiency learners may find the instructional content oversimplified, the materials might be too complex for the low-proficiency students. Addressing these discrepancies demands meticulous planning and the implementation of tailored strategies like scaffolding, peer tutoring, and customized instructional materials to ensure effective learning experiences for all. Secondly, the heterogeneity of learning styles among students may complicate classroom procedures. Educators must adapt their teaching methods to accommodate the preferences of individual learners, thus employing diverse approaches such as multimedia resources, interactive activities, and collaborative learning to engage students effectively.

Thirdly, varying educational and cultural backgrounds of the learners might hinder language learning in a mixed-ability setting. Students bring unique perspectives, beliefs, ideologies and values, necessitating educators to foster an inclusive environment that not only respects but also integrates diverse cultural as well as educational backgrounds into instruction. Instructors might have to bridge the gaps in prior knowledge or stimuli among the students and provide culturally inclusive materials in order to mitigate such challenges. Furthermore, managing classroom dynamics becomes extremely challenging in mixed-ability classrooms, given the differences in abilities, skills, interests, and attitudes among students. Establishing clear expectations, routines, and proactive management strategies are vital to creating a positive and harmonious learning atmosphere conducive to academic growth and mutual respect between all individuals in the classroom.

Lack of teacher training can also pose significant challenges in handling mixed-ability classrooms. It is

imperative that instructors in such a diverse context possess the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively adapt materials, differentiate instruction, address diverse learning needs, and expertly manage classroom dynamics in such a setting. Without specifically tailored training or professional development opportunities focused on tackling the numerous complexities and strategies for mixed-ability classrooms, educators may struggle to fulfill their roles as a facilitator of diverse and inclusive knowledge. Aspects like creating culturally responsive curriculum content, adapting instructional methods and designing assessment modules for varying proficiency levels require highly trained educational professionals. In Huang's (2014) study investigating mixed-ability teaching in Taiwan, it was reported that 32% of the instructors did not have any mixed-ability teacher training. Huang's suggestion was to increase government-led training in mixed-ability teaching.

Limited instructional time in a mixed-ability classroom can also hinder an educator's ability to effectively address the diverse needs of students (Salli-Copur, 2005), potentially leading to unequal learning opportunities and outcomes. Large class sizes can be a contributing factor for limited instructional time in such settings. Reid et al. (1981) supports that idea and posits that the optimal class size consists of only 20 to 25 learners. Strategies such as flexible grouping, peer tutoring, collaborative learning and targeted intervention can help mitigate these challenges and optimize instructional time for all students.

Ur (1991) also discusses some significant challenges of mixed-ability classes. Firstly, discipline issues may arise due to varying student opinions on lesson difficulty, with high achievers becoming bored and low achievers feeling

frustrated and disappointed, complicating effective teaching. Secondly, divergent interests, skills, motivations, and learning styles among learners may pose difficulty for teachers in creating engaging and relevant content for all students.

Furthermore, rigid textbook materials may limit teachers' ability to adapt to the diverse needs, proficiencies and aptitudes of learners, hindering flexibility and spontaneity in instruction. Additionally, in large mixed-ability classrooms, it can be difficult for instructors to provide individual attention and feedback as well as personalized support to students, thus hampering the overall process of progress monitoring and tracking the effectiveness of learning outcomes. Lastly, participation imbalances may occur in such settings, where highly capable learners might dominate class engagement and low achievers fall behind, creating classroom disparities and hindering their language proficiency growth due to limited or inadequate teacher attention and support.

While navigating the complexities of such educational settings can be challenging for an instructor, one cannot be indifferent to the benefits of having such a dynamic learning environment. Ur (1991) discusses the benefits of mixed-ability classes at length. According to her, mixed-ability classrooms offer a wealth of benefits, serving as a rich pool of human resources where students bring diverse knowledge, ideas, and interests, which can be utilized to create engaging and varied student-centered lessons (Hess, 1999). Furthermore, mixed-ability classes promote the educational value of cooperative and collaborative learning, as students are encouraged to interact, assist, and learn from each other, fostering a

harmonious and mutually supportive atmosphere. Additionally, mixed-ability classes nurture learner autonomy by providing a learning environment where students have the freedom to work individually, collaborate with peers, or even take on teaching roles, fostering independence and self-directed learning. Moreover, mixed-ability classes present an opportunity for teachers to develop professionally, as they adapt their instructional approaches to meet the diverse needs of students, promoting their own growth and professionalism in the process.

Huang (2014) also elaborates some advantages of mixed-ability classes. One of the major advantages is that mixed-ability classes help avoid labeling students based on their language proficiency or aptitude, rather creating an equal learning opportunity for them by improving their self-evaluation and motivation, and decreasing the sense of failure (Hallam and Ireson, 2005). Huang believes that this can promote educational justice. Collier (1982) also believes that mixed-ability education is a necessary step in the direction of greater educational justice (p.25). Mixed-ability classrooms can also be said to foster personal and social development in students (Tomlinson, 2001). This approach can provide students with self-confidence and a sense of security, thus developing an autonomous profile as learners and self-sufficient individuals. Mixed-ability environment of learning can also promote social development by making the learners more tolerant and respectful of individual differences. Furthermore, these kinds of settings are also advantageous because they can effectively cater to the individual needs of students (Boaler, 2008). Ireson et al. (2005) believe that mixed-ability approach can not only assist in catering for varied learning styles of learners but also be mindful of the different potential intelligences (a

theory propounded by Gardner, 1984) possessed by them. Finally, mixed-ability classrooms are also said to create a better, happier atmosphere (Westwood & Arnold, 2004) by promoting a feeling of security and mutual respect. The culmination of effectively utilizing the benefits of mixed-ability classes can definitely result in the creation of inclusive and dynamic learning environments where all students have the opportunity to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, and the educators, professionally.

According to Syathroh et al. (2019), teachers' attitudes play an important role in conducting effective mixed-ability classes (p.60). Bremner (2008) also believes that a mixed-ability class heavily relies on the expertise of the teacher in helping the learners to achieve their potential. Rubino (2004) asserts that a major task for a teacher is to take the role of a "linguistic mediator" and facilitate the relationship among learners in a mixed-ability setting (p.35). It is imperative that the teacher is familiar not only with the varied needs of the pupils but also their different linguistic abilities in order to meet their diverse learning needs (Simanova, 2010). If the instructor is unaware of the individual learner needs and aptitudes, there is a considerable risk of the "high-achievers not be(ing) stretched enough while the low achievers. . . (being) neglected" (Bremner, 2008).

Both Huang (2014) and Salli-Copur (2005), like many other scholars, investigate the challenges faced by teachers in teaching in a mixed-ability classroom. Some scholarly articles of the past have also proposed different strategies to overcome the challenges of mixed-ability classrooms, but most of them were set in a general context. In order to address the problem at the root, it is imperative

that students' opinions are also explored, especially in the South Asian context, due to limited prior literature relating to this region.

This study aims to investigate the dynamics of mixed-ability classrooms at the tertiary level in Bangladesh, contributing to the relatively limited research available on this context. Rahman (2018) explored the challenges faced by English teachers in mixed-ability classrooms and proposed some solutions; however, his study was conducted with a focus on higher-secondary level English education only. He recommended providing adequate teaching-learning materials and teachers' training to create the best possible classroom environment for the students, and in order to be aware of student interests as well as to consider the individual differences of the students' learning attitudes in the mixed-ability classes.

Siddique (2015) examined the challenges of teaching writing skills at the tertiary-level in Bangladesh. However, this study provided a unitary approach to improving a single language skill, and failed to provide any insight into the teaching of other language skills in such a setting. She came to the conclusion that difference of interest among the students, difference in participation of the students, stress on teachers, disciplinary problems were some of the barriers in learning writing skills in tertiary-level mixed-ability English classes in Bangladesh. Moreover, positive classroom environment, needs analysis, group work, variety in materials, extra homework, using visuals, games and dramatization have been recommended as the strategies that can be followed for the best learning outcome in a mixed-ability class.

Due to the lack of prior literature providing a holistic reflection of the tertiary-level mixed-ability English classes in Bangladesh, this research endeavors to shed light on both the challenges encountered and the possible strategies to be employed to surmount these challenges in the above-mentioned setting. Both students' and teachers' (authors') opinions are considered in gaining a deeper understanding of the issue at hand, making this research both student-led and teacher-supplemented. Through a synthesis of empirical findings and pedagogical insights, this study aspires to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding tertiary-level English language education in Bangladesh, offering actionable recommendations to inform instructional practices and promote equitable educational outcomes within such diverse educational contexts.

Methodology

This study was conducted following the mixed-method research design, with components of both quantitative (multiple choice and short answer questions) and qualitative (open-ended) question types present in the data collection tool (E-questionnaire).

Data Collection

Participants

Ninety-two tertiary-level (undergraduate and graduate) students from 4 public universities or institutes and 4 private universities participated in the study. All of the participants had already completed at least one introductory-level English course in their respective tertiary educational institutions.

Sampling

The target population was chosen through Probability Sampling, specifically, stratified sampling, where sample was drawn from tertiary-level students who have completed at least one English course during their undergraduate or graduate studies. They were then divided into two subgroups - public or private university students and then selected randomly in proportion to the total population. This enhanced the representativeness of the sample and reduction of selection bias. As a result, generalizability of the findings was maintained well given a diverse and balanced representation of the population under study. Within the target population, Voluntary Response Sampling was conducted based on ease of access.

Instrument

Data was collected through a Google Form survey or e-questionnaire. A quantitative survey questionnaire was designed on the basis of requirement with both quantitative as well as qualitative questions, along with some basic demographic questions at the beginning. The questionnaire was divided into three parts, with the first part containing demographic questions about the participants, the second part tackling the challenges faced by the participants in mixed-ability classrooms and the final part reserved for the possible strategies to overcome the above-mentioned challenges. A three-point (“Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree”) Likert Scale was used to determine the intensity of participants’ opinions regarding the quantitative questions. Some qualitative questions were also provided to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ opinions on the matter.

Procedure

Before distributing the e-questionnaire to the participants, it was shared with some tertiary-level English students from the first author's work place in order to determine its efficacy and receive constructive feedback. All the questions were designed in a way to avoid any misunderstanding or ambiguities. With the help from the feedback received from the students, the questions were fine-tuned and updated into a new sequence and edited with simpler vocabulary. The data collection procedure was web-based and the target population was presented with the e-questionnaire through social media portals like Facebook, WhatsApp or email.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was employed on the quantitative attitudinal data through Google Form responses and Google Sheets and illustrated graphically. Thematic analysis was also performed on the qualitative data.

Results

This section presents the findings from a study investigating the challenges and strategies associated with mixed-ability English classes (MACs) for Bangladeshi university students from the students' point of view. It mostly addresses the first research question, where the students identify the challenges they face in a mixed-ability English language classroom. They also suggest some possible strategies to overcome them, in alignment with the second research question.

A total of 92 students participated in the study, representing both undergraduate (89.1%) and postgraduate (10.9%) programs. These students came from a variety of public and private universities and departments (English,

English Language Teaching, Aeronautical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Computer Science and Engineering, Environmental, Water and Coastal Engineering, Mathematics) of Bangladesh.

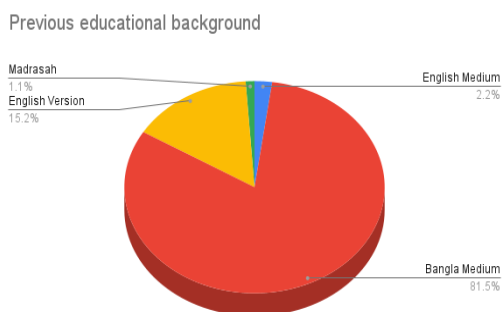


Fig. 3.1: Previous educational background of the Participants

The majority (81.5%) reported having a Bangla medium educational background, followed by English version (15.2%) and English medium and madrasah (3.3%). In terms of self-rated English proficiency, students identified as beginner (18.5%), intermediate (51.1%), upper intermediate (23.9%), and advanced (6.5%).



Fig. 3.2: Satisfaction with the Quality of Education during Secondary and Higher-Secondary Education

The study explored student perceptions of their English language learning experiences. Over one-third (38.3%) of participants were not satisfied with the quality of English instruction that they received during their secondary and higher secondary education. This finding suggests potential gaps in preparation for the demands of university-level English. All participants confirmed being in Mixed-ability Classrooms (MACs), which refers to classrooms where students with varying levels of ability (including different strengths and weaknesses) are taught together. A strong majority acknowledged a significant connection between their prior English learning and their current proficiency level (specific percentage not mentioned), which resulted in either a positive or a negative transfer. However, opinions diverged regarding the impact of mixed-ability classes on the overall quality of education. Only 27.7% agreed that MACs hinder learning, with 34% disagreeing and 36.2% remaining neutral.

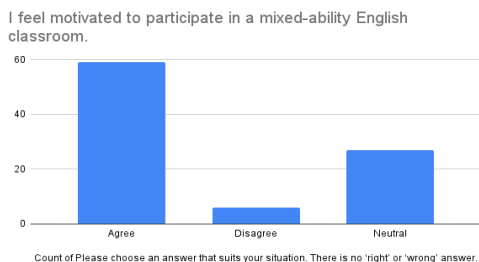
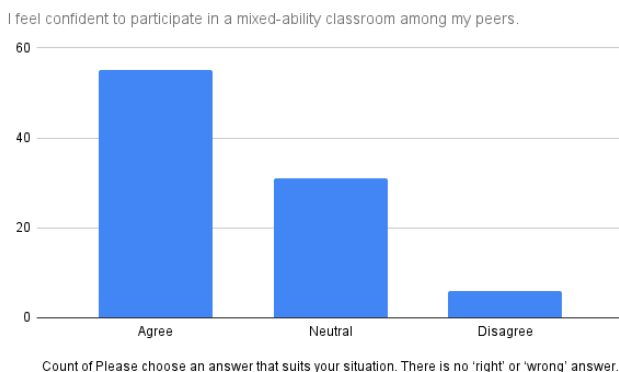


Fig. 3.3: Rate of Motivation in Mixed-Ability Classroom

An interesting finding emerged when examining student experiences within MACs. Nearly half (46%) of the

participants felt that their individual learning needs were met despite acknowledging the existence of challenges. This suggests a positive learning environment, further supported



by the fact that 62.8% of students found their English classes interesting and reported feeling motivated to participate.

Fig. 3.4: Rate of Confidence in Mixed-Ability Classroom

To further support this, nearly 60% of the students expressed confidence in participating in MACs, while approximately 34% remained neutral, and about 7% disagreed. This suggests a positive outlook for the future of teaching in Bangladesh.

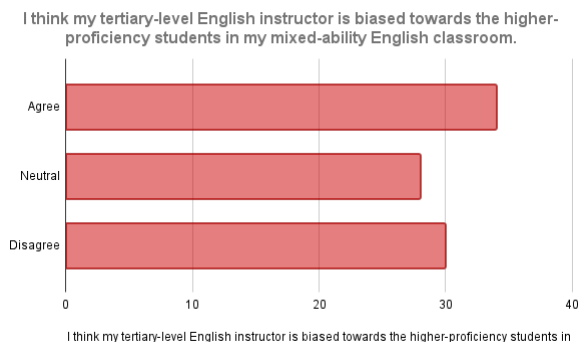


Fig. 3.5: Biases in Mixed-Ability Classroom

However, the need for improvement in addressing the diverse needs within MACs became evident. While 60% of students appreciated the effort and attention they received from instructors, 34% felt that teachers favored better-performing students. Regarding course materials, 30 students felt the materials were beyond their current level, while 44.7% believed they were too basic, highlighting a need for adaptation to better cater to the varying proficiency levels within the classroom.

Students identified a range of challenges they faced in MACs, including a lack of adaptation in course materials, cultural and linguistic differences, issues with motivation and engagement, limited access to context-specific resources and support, fear of failure, weak foundational skills in areas like writing and reading, and difficulty keeping pace with the overall flow of the class.

In response to these challenges, students also suggested a number of strategies that could be implemented to improve the learning experience in MACs. These strategies included fostering peer tutoring and collaboration

among students, employing flexible grouping based on individual needs, implementing differentiated instruction tailored to various proficiency levels, providing scaffolding to offer targeted support, integrating technology to enhance learning, incorporating explicit language instruction focused on vocabulary and grammar development, cultivating an inclusive classroom environment that celebrates diversity, providing regular feedback and opportunities for reflection, and encouraging learner autonomy through the use of self-directed learning activities.

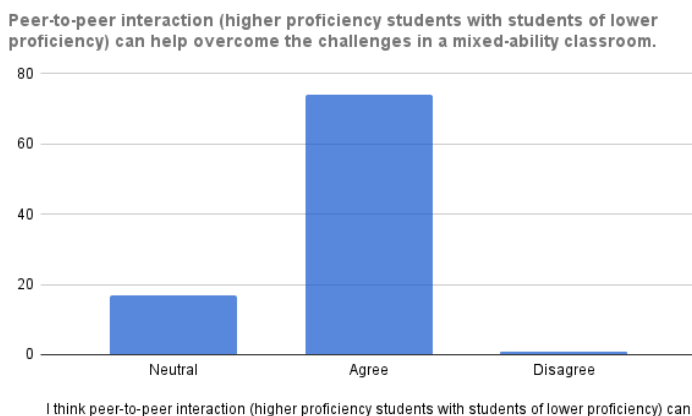


Fig. 3.6: Peer-to-peer interaction can help overcome the challenges in MACs

Almost 80% of the students agreed to and suggested that peer-to-peer interaction can help overcome many of the existing challenges in MACs. Almost 20% remained neutral to this fact whereas a negligible amount of students (around 2%) disagreed with it.

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the experiences of Bangladeshi university

students navigating the complexities of MACs. By acknowledging the identified challenges and exploring the suggested strategies, educators and curriculum developers can work towards creating more effective and inclusive English language learning environments that cater to the diverse needs and abilities of their students.

Discussion

Based on the received data, one of the major causes of diverse English proficiency levels among the participants was their equally diverse academic backgrounds (English Medium, Bangla Medium, Madrasah), which also posed a challenge in a mixed-ability setting. Unsurprisingly, 81.5% of the participants had Bangla as the medium of instruction in their primary to higher secondary education. Not having English as the medium of instruction in the classroom or having course materials in English earlier in their educational spheres could have contributed to a disparity in English proficiency currently at the tertiary-level, according to 71 of the 92 (78%) participants. Even though most of the students shared that they felt confident among their peers in mixed-ability classrooms and felt motivated to participate in class, the majority of the students felt that their instructors were biased towards the higher-proficiency students in the classroom. This bias could eventually affect the level of motivation and confidence of the learners, giving rise to insecurities and pose a challenge in a mixed-ability setting.

In response to the qualitative portion of the second part of the questionnaire, some students further elaborated that communication gap was another challenge that they faced in a mixed-ability classroom. They faced difficulty in communicating with the teacher and keeping pace with the classroom activities due to cultural and linguistic

differences. The same challenges were further exacerbated due to the lack of culture-sensitive and context-friendly classroom resources and support materials. Another difficulty mentioned by the students was the fear of being compared to other students (of higher proficiency) and being ridiculed in front of peers. This hindered their classroom participation and prevented them from engaging freely in class, putting a dent in their motivation and self-confidence.

Responding to the open-ended question in the final part of the questionnaire, participants suggested different strategies to overcome the challenges of a mixed-ability classroom, which addresses the second research question of the study. Some students suggested pair work and group work as a solution to encourage low-confidence students. In their words, *“More emphasis should be given to improve the communication skill of the students.”* They also suggested longer class times to solve the time constraint issues. Some students suggested for the instructors to get to know all the students individually in order to be aware about the varied interests, proficiency levels and cultural disparity among them; to quote. *“Teachers may attempt to discover the individualities of the students so that all can collectively benefit from someone’s strong points to work on their own weak points. Thus, level up as a whole.”* This could also lead and help the instructors to design effective need-based, inclusive class materials. As one of the participants remarked, *“Overcoming the challenges faced in a mixed-ability English classroom requires a combination of strategies, patience, and adaptability.”*

Over the years, various linguists and scholars have brought forth certain strategies to overcome the challenges

in a mixed-ability classroom. Bremner (2008) and Simanova (2010) elaborate some useful strategies, and the first of them is creating a supportive learning environment, so that learners feel confident in their abilities to perform well in the classroom. This correlates to the suggestion given by one of the participants in our study as well. Secondly, proper classroom management by teachers is suggested in order to ensure maximum student engagement, regardless of linguistic proficiency. Some of the classroom management activities mentioned are need analysis, setting time limits, providing constructive feedback, getting to know the learners individually and so on. This too aligns with one of the feedbacks from the participants, who mentions, *“Everyone in the class needs to be given priority. Students can learn in comfort as environment [sic], interpersonal relationships, and structure of the classroom are all crucial for learning.”* Moreover, teachers could also apply variety in order to accommodate and engage all the students in a mixed-ability classroom. The variety includes, but is not limited to methods of teaching, topics of lesson or materials and classroom activities which helps generate learner motivation and interest. Some participants in our study also suggested incorporating diversity in their learning experiences to better address challenges in a more dynamic and inclusive way. Overall, the recommendations from Bremner (2008) and Simanova (2010) resonate strongly with the feedback from our participants.

Syaroth et al. (2019, p.64), based on the studies of Bremner (2008) and Simanova (2010), suggests varieties of classroom activities in teaching mixed-ability classes. The first variety is the use of open-ended tasks in mixed-ability classes. Associated with the communicative language teaching method (Prodromou, 1995), open-ended tasks

provide opportunities for all students to participate in class, and communicate with the teacher and their peers. This allows learners of all proficiency levels to work on the same tasks, but at their own pace. The second variety is language games and other relaxing learning activities. According to Uberman (1998, p.20), a relaxing, stress-free atmosphere can be created in a classroom through games, thus, helping students of lower proficiency levels to participate in class without anxiety. This also decreases the fear of failure or negative evaluation among the learners (Horwitz et. al, 1986). This recommendation aligns with the feedback from our study, which highlighted that some students face challenges in keeping up with classroom activities. Due to varying paces and cognitive styles, they often struggle to match the progress of their peers. Implementing open-ended tasks can address this issue, allowing students to work according to their individual interests, abilities, and pace. On top of that, engaging in relaxing activities is often beneficial to strengthen cognitive abilities and boost confidence, to make the students perform more effectively in MACs.

The third strategy to address MAC challenges is task differentiation. Harmer (1998) suggests that instructors can use the same materials in the classroom but tailor tasks to suit students' varying needs. While it may be more convenient for instructors to have students perform the same tasks (Williard-Holt, 1994), differentiation is necessary in accommodating diverse learners across all settings (Hockett, 2018). According to Roberts (2012), differentiation is what teachers do to meet the individual needs of the learners, whether by varying tasks, teaching methods, or expected outcomes. Tomlinson (2013) explains that this enables students to process information in their own ways and express their learning in unique ways. In our study,

participants noted that differentiation makes tasks not only engaging but also makes them feel included in the classroom. For instance, one participant stated, *"When tasks are adjusted to my pace and interest, I feel more motivated to participate and perform."* This reflects Tomlinson's (2013) claim about personalization fostering engagement and ownership of learning. Another participant mentioned, *"Differentiated tasks make me feel less pressured to match others' pace and let me focus on my own progress."* This aligns with Roberts' (2012) assertion about differentiation meeting individual needs.

The fourth suggestion to incorporate maximum students in MACs is compulsory plus optional tasks. Through this variety, the instructor can provide some compulsory additional tasks after the completion of the core task. This will ensure that students of all proficiency levels are engaged in class, especially the students with higher proficiency levels, and also provide the students of lower proficiency levels with the sense of achievement upon completion of a task. However, based on some of the findings of our research, teachers should approach differentiation tasks with a clear focus on fairness and inclusivity. Then, the fifth variety or strategy is providing homework to the learners. As per our study, we found out that there remains a gap among students of different proficiency levels to perform tasks equally. Following the trail, students of all proficiency levels can reflect on what they learned in class by doing their home-works. Students of higher proficiency levels or aptitude can also be provided with extra homework if necessary. Lastly, the final strategy is that of flexible grouping. Individualization, pair-work and group work are some of the most popular groupings noticed in classrooms. As participants are seen lagging behind in

many cases from our research, groupings can be helpful in many ways. Moon (2000) defines pair-work as a “strategy to organize (learners) in ways that will maximize learning” (p.53). In mixed-ability classrooms, homogeneous, grouping, or heterogeneous grouping can also be explored, based on the difficulty of the given classroom tasks. One of the participants suggested, *“Group works [sic] can be done to minimize the gap in the academic environment.”*

The authors of this study, through their own experiences of teaching English in tertiary-level mixed-ability classes, would like to propose some strategies, in alignment with the findings of this study in order to combat some of the existing challenges. To begin with, some of the most common challenges that us teachers face in mixed-ability classes are varying levels of engagement and participation, difficulty in providing inclusive feedback, designing engaging activities for students of all proficiency levels, managing student stress and frustration, managing time constraints, and so on. To address these challenges effectively, the authors of this study propose the following strategies tailored for tertiary-level MACs - encouraging equal classroom participation, employing ‘correction slots’ and peer-feedback, employing differentiation, including relaxing and motivating activities, peer-tutoring and collaboration, using technology, providing adequate pre-service teacher-training, etc.

Firstly, to ensure and encourage maximum classroom engagement from the students, round-robin discussions or Think-Pair-Share exercises can be a good option, where students are given some individual thinking time, followed by pair-checking or sharing of their answers and finally, elicitation of answers from one or more students

by the teacher. Secondly, to provide effective and inclusive feedback, avoid overcorrection and performing stress-free error-correction, ‘correction slots’ could be employed, where the instructor can take some time for error correction as well as displaying examples of good language use after a classroom activity and address the students’ mistakes as a whole rather than do on-spot correction, which could also contribute to more performance-anxiety. The instructor could also encourage peer-feedback sessions and adequately praise the students for their efforts before the end of the class. This could ensure stress-free error correction and increase overall student satisfaction. It can also help lessen performance anxiety largely, as the students will not be worried about being put ‘on-spot’ while being corrected in front of the whole class. Thirdly, in order to design engaging classroom activities in order to cater to the needs of students of varied proficiency levels, differentiation can be employed, by designing tiered assignments where activities of different difficulty levels are designed on the same topic, to keep all the students engaged and motivated and to avoid student frustrations or feelings of inadequacy. This could be helpful, especially in assigning short in-class assignments or homeworks, where the instructors could design tasks of various difficulty levels and assign them to students based on their proficiency levels. Integrating relaxing and motivational activities could also be a useful tool to decrease the stress levels in a language classroom. The instructors could use game-based activities, meditation, breathing exercises and so on to create a stress-free environment in the classroom.

Another important aspect in a language classroom is to encourage collaboration. Classroom activities which encourage peer collaboration, pair-work or group-work

should be emphasized. In-class or after-class peer-tutoring (where students of higher proficiency levels provide academic or linguistic assistance to students of lower proficiency) could also immensely help both the learners and the instructors, especially if there is an issue of time constraint in the classroom. As an assistance, technology could be of great help as well, both in the classroom and for providing supplementary support after class.. Technology can also simplify the assessment process and the provision of individualized feedback. Not only that, instructors can help set up ‘Help Centers’ to promote and facilitate peer-tutoring and collaboration. In this context, ‘Scaffolding,’ a concept led by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, could be very beneficial. It involves coaching or modeling to support learners until they develop cognitive competence, after which support is removed, allowing independent growth (Gibbons, 2022). Le and Nguyen (2010) describe scaffolding as an effective strategy for MACs, where instructors and advanced students support less capable peers through collaboration. Setting up ‘Help Centers’, could not only simplify the process of providing individualized feedback and peer-support, it could also help the instructors manage the issue of time constraints in the classroom.

Lastly but most importantly, teacher training is very crucial in MACs. Without the required skills and strategies, MACs are almost impossible to manage effectively. In Bangladesh, where classrooms are very large and varied, proper teacher training becomes even more essential. Many teachers in Bangladesh may not have received formal training in differentiated or inclusive teaching practices. It becomes more challenging for students to meet the dynamics of the classroom and bear effective output. Pre-service teacher training also helps the instructors in curriculum and

materials designing, and monitoring and classroom management in a mixed-ability classroom.

All of the above-mentioned strategies and suggestions can create opportunities for learner autonomy or self-directed learning, which can also be immensely helpful, if practiced and promoted in mixed-ability settings. Not only does it help to increase learner confidence and independence, but it also promotes critical thinking, empowering the learner to be able to support oneself in a mixed-ability setting, even when the instructors might not be available for individualized support.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research is poised to illuminate the nuanced intricacies of teaching mixed-ability English classes in Bangladeshi universities, offering student-approved empirical insights into the challenges encountered and the possible strategies to be deployed by educators and students alike in mixed-ability academic or linguistic settings. In that essence, this study can be said to be student-led, yet teacher-supplemented, and with the aim to empower both the learners and instructors in diverse educational contexts. The authors aspire to delineate a roadmap for fostering inclusive and effective learning by informing pedagogical praxis, offering actionable recommendations, promoting equitable educational outcomes and contributing to the overall development of the tertiary-level English language education in Bangladesh.

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