

CHALLENGES OF HETEROGENEOUS CLASSES**MIRELA COSTELEANU****University of Pitești**

Abstract: *When organizing classroom activities, some teachers believe that the best option is to mix the groups so that students of all levels can be represented in each class (heterogeneous grouping). Other teachers believe that students should be organized by ability levels (homogeneous grouping). Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. Heterogeneous classes allow below-grade students to follow the lead of their peers whose language level is better than theirs. When lower-ability students encounter a problem, they may find it easier to ask for clarification from their peers than from their teacher. Gifted students, in their turn, are encouraged to assume a leadership role, which helps them develop their skills and boost their self-confidence. A downside of this approach is that those above-grade students who resent acting like leaders will feel overwhelmed by this responsibility which hinders them from reaching their learning potential. One of the main benefits of homogeneous groups is that each and every student is encouraged to work at their own pace. Besides, students seem to thrive when they are surrounded by learners who have the same skills and needs as they do. One of the downsides of this approach is that teachers associate students with the group they belong to instead of their actual skills. Another disadvantage is that learners are generally grouped according to subjective criteria, such as test scores, which might place them in a group that they don't really belong to.*

Keywords: *English, homogeneous classes, heterogeneous classes, learners;*

1. Introduction

Nowadays English classes are becoming more and more diverse throughout the world, which affects both learners and teachers. Being part of a heterogeneous class made up of different types of learners may turn out to be a challenge in itself because learners have to adapt to their peers' language level, as well as their learning styles, their learning paces and their various objectives. Teachers, in their turn, are faced with the challenge of meeting all their learners' needs.

When organizing a classroom activity, teachers often divide students into groups. The first question that arises when considering groups is whether they should be homogeneous or heterogeneous. The former refers to those groups that are made up of learners of similar strengths and performance whereas the latter refers to those groups which contain students of different abilities.

There are various definitions of heterogeneous English classes. Harmer sees them as a major concern for most teachers because "they appear to make planning - and the execution of plans in lessons - extremely difficult" (2013:127). According to Ur (2005), a heterogeneous class is an English class not only with beginners, intermediate and advanced learners, but also with learners characterized by different levels of motivation or belonging to different age groups. The idea of a

homogeneous class is a utopia because, even in the case of a class made up of beginners, there are noticeable differences among learners in point of learning styles and speed.

2. Homogeneous classes

Ideally, when enrolling in a language course, learners should be given a placement test in order to be put in a class with other people who are at the same level as they are. There are several benefits to teaching/learning in a homogeneous group. First of all, teachers don't have to adapt their curriculum to individual needs since all the learners are at the same level of proficiency and are likely to make progress at the same rate. Secondly, learners are much more eager to fully engage themselves in the lesson because they feel that the pace is neither too fast nor too slow for them. This approach also has some downsides. For instance, being put in a so-called *lower group* will have a negative effect on some students' level of motivation and self-confidence.

3. Heterogeneous classes

Unfortunately, in most schools, the above-mentioned scenario is highly unlikely, so students end up in a class where there are striking differences among them in point of language knowledge, learning style and speed. Low-, medium-, and high-level learners should get the same amount of attention from their teachers and they should pay equal efforts to actively participate in all classroom activities. In most situations, there is particular concern for the needs of those learners who are having difficulty at the lower end of the scale as well as for "gifted" learners (Dinnocenti 1998).

In mixed ability classes, there are visible discrepancies among learners in point of proficiency. It is virtually impossible for an English teacher to find materials that perfectly match each and every student's expectations. What may seem accessible or even easy to advanced learners will pose a lot of difficulties to intermediate learners, not to mention beginners. The stronger students will feel frustrated and demotivated if they are not challenged by the materials they are provided with. These students are unlikely to reach their learning potential if they have to learn at their peers' slow pace. Eventually, they end up thinking that the English class is nothing but a waste of time. In contrast, the weaker students will be confused if the teaching materials are too difficult for them, feeling as if they were left out.

Students' age needs to be taken into account by teachers when dealing with a heterogeneous class. People of different ages have different needs, skills and cognitive capabilities. For instance, most students studying to become engineers have just graduated from college. They are still used to studying, setting clear goals and doing their best to reach them. On the other hand, there are students who are in their thirties or even forties who lost contact with school a long time ago. According to Jeremy Harmer (14), adult learners can exhibit some traits that can easily make learning and teaching problematic. Thus, they might be reluctant to

certain teaching methods, or resent getting engaged in role-playing activities, or scenarios that might put them in an uncomfortable position; they may feel anxious or under-confident about learning a language and sometimes worry about their intellectual capacities.

Students' learning style is closely connected with their age. As far as undergraduates are concerned, they have different preferences as regards learning. Those who are in their twenties or early thirties prefer using more modern learning methods to the detriment of the traditional ones. They rely on the Internet to help them improve their English. They watch videos, listen to recordings, they may even use programs that correct their pronunciation or help them develop their communicative skills. They have access to interactive activity books and they can search the Internet to find content on any topic they are interested in. They practice their English by reading books or newspaper articles, listening to songs or podcasts. This way, they not only improve their English skills, but also learn a lot about the culture of other countries. Watching the news, including sports coverage or popular TV shows, can help learners see the world with different eyes and get insight into how the culture of another country differs from their own. On the other hand, students who are in their late thirties or in their forties are more reluctant to use technology in their learning process. They rely on traditional methods of learning for several reasons, one of them being their lack of autonomy, which makes them need permanent guidance from their teacher.

Learners' learning style is also interconnected with their educational background. Thus, those who laid a lot of stress on such subjects as math, physics or computer science during their high school years are good at learning grammar whereas those who focused on literature or history have good reading and writing skills.

3.1. Advantages of heterogeneous classes for learners

In mixed ability groups, the best learners will have the opportunity to act like leaders. The more relaxed the atmosphere in the classroom is, the more tempted such students will be to help their peers whenever they encounter difficulties in carrying out a task. Weaker students also benefit from being grouped with the most capable ones. They will do their best to catch up with them. They have the chance to follow their lead. Discussion and collaboration give high achievers the opportunity to elaborate their thinking, while providing low achievers with the opportunity to ask questions that they may not feel comfortable asking their teacher (Wiliam 2011).

3.2. Disadvantages of heterogeneous classes for learners

Some gifted students take delight in the opportunities and responsibilities that mixed ability classes provide whereas others feel uncomfortable with peer tutoring. They resent having slow-moving students among them because they are afraid they might hinder their own progress. Weaker students will take a back seat in heterogeneous classes and let their gifted peers do all the work. This happens

mostly if the latter want to finish the task as quickly as possible. The former will feel they have no contribution to the class, which negatively impacts their willingness to actively take part in classroom activities.

3.3. Advantages of heterogeneous classes for teachers

Teaching heterogeneous classes is quite a challenge for any teacher no matter how experienced he/she is. On the plus side, heterogeneous classes encourage students' autonomy and break the monotony of homogeneous classes. Students are aware of their different levels and needs, so they don't rely on their teacher to answer all their questions and to come up with solutions to all their problems. They ask one another for help, they share notes and ideas, having a cooperative approach (Dudley-Evans, St John 1998).

3.4. Disadvantages of heterogeneous classes for teachers

Teachers usually prefer to teach homogeneous groups of students. They see them as a major advantage. Learners have the same level of proficiency, the same age, the same learning style and roughly the same needs. When they are divided into high-, medium-, and low-level learners, students are likely to make progress at different paces and to create different expectations in their teachers. They have different gaps to fill, different questions to ask, so it is quite demanding for teachers to meet all their students' needs. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the heterogeneous model he/she has adopted is beneficial to each and every student in the class. If it doesn't function properly, it is his/her job to adapt it to their needs. The better teachers know their classes, the more effective and impactful they will be. Knowing their students' names, ages and family backgrounds is useful, but digging deeper and discovering their learning interests and strengths is essential.

4. How to handle heterogeneous classes

When teaching mixed ability classes, most teachers design their English course having the majority of learners in mind. If most of them are at an intermediate level, teachers tend to use materials suitable for them. The weaker students will find these materials difficult whereas the stronger ones will find them easy and boring. Another approach is to aim activities at the stronger and weaker learners. Those learners who are in the middle of the heterogeneous class will often feel neglected. Teachers may divide the time they have at their disposal so as to target every group equally. Teachers should support the gifted students by supplying additional tasks in order to make them feel challenged and encouraged to develop their skills every day. The weaker students need to catch up with their peers, but they can't do it without their teacher's assistance. On the other hand, there are situations when the teacher wants to teach the class as a whole, not as groups of learners. This happens because they "want to build or reinforce the group's identity" or because they "believe that everyone in the group should learn the same thing or be offered the same information" (Harmer 2013:131).

According to Harmer, when dealing with students who are at different language levels and have different needs, teachers can provide them with different material, tailoring it to their individual needs (2013:128). Students have the freedom to choose which material to study. If teachers know their classes very well, they can divide them into groups and provide differentiated materials for each group. Teachers may also give them different tasks or “flexible tasks” as Lindstromberg calls them (2004).

5. Conclusion

Heterogeneous classes are less than ideal for students and teachers. Students generally thrive when they are surrounded by peers of similar language level and allowed to make progress together. In mixed ability classes, some students will be provided with materials that will be either below or above their English level, which puts them at a serious disadvantage. It can trigger in them a negative attitude towards studying English, which will hinder their progress. Thus, mixed ability classes are a challenge for teachers and students alike, but also a big opportunity. It is not easy at all to differentiate instruction and to offer support to students of different levels. But coming up with methods to bring different students together to carry out the same task unlocks opportunities that learners in homogeneous classes rarely encounter.

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