

# An Analysis of the Challenges and Strategies of English Language Teachers in Teaching Mixed-Ability Classes: A Qualitative Inquiry

## Un Análisis de los Desafíos y Estrategias de los Profesores de Inglés en la Enseñanza de Clases de Habilidades Mixtas: Una Investigación Cualitativa

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to examine the difficulties encountered by English language teachers when instructing mixed-ability classes, as well as the strategies they used to overcome these challenges. The study used a qualitative research design, where data was collected through classroom observation and interviews with five different English teachers from secondary schools in Nepalgunj Sub-metropolitan city of Banke district, Nepal through judgmental non-random sampling procedures. The study had three research questions that concentrated on understanding teachers' views of mixed-ability classes, finding the difficulties teachers experience while teaching in mixed-ability classes, and proposing some educational consequences for the same. The findings of the study are significant for teachers, students, school administrations, course designers, textbook writers, and policy makers, as they will be able to manage different types of learners better in the classroom. The study concludes that mixed-ability classes are challenging, but they offer rich diversity in learners. Teachers encountered difficulties due to variations in language learning ability, learning style, cultural background, age, learning experiences, and mother tongue. The study suggests that teachers use various strategies, such as differentiated instruction, peer teaching, and collaborative learning, to address the challenges of mixed-ability classes. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the perceptions, issues, and practices of English teachers in mixed-ability classes.

**Keywords:** perception; practice; mixed ability; language learning; ELT.

### RESUMEN

El propósito de esta investigación fue examinar las dificultades encontradas por los profesores de inglés al impartir clases de habilidades mixtas, así como las estrategias que utilizaron para superar estos desafíos. El estudio utilizó un diseño de investigación cualitativo, donde los datos se recopilaron a través de la observación en el aula y entrevistas con cinco profesores de inglés de diferentes escuelas secundarias en Nepalgunj, ciudad submetropolitana del distrito de Banke, Nepal, a través de procedimientos de muestreo no aleatorios de juicio. El estudio tenía tres preguntas de investigación que se concentraron en comprender las opiniones de los maestros sobre las clases de

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habilidades mixtas, encontrar las dificultades que experimentan los maestros al enseñar en clases de habilidades mixtas y proponer algunos resultados educativos para las mismas. Los hallazgos del estudio son importantes para los docentes, los estudiantes, las administraciones escolares, los diseñadores de cursos, los escritores de libros de texto y los encargados de formular políticas, ya que podrán manejar mejor a los diferentes tipos de alumnos en el aula. El estudio concluye que las clases de habilidades mixtas son desafiantes, pero ofrecen una rica diversidad en los estudiantes. Los maestros encontraron dificultades debido a las variaciones en la capacidad de aprendizaje del idioma, el estilo de aprendizaje, los antecedentes culturales, la edad, las experiencias de aprendizaje y la lengua materna. El estudio sugiere que los maestros usan varias estrategias, como instrucción diferenciada, enseñanza entre pares y aprendizaje colaborativo, para abordar los desafíos de las clases de habilidades mixtas. En general, el estudio proporciona información valiosa sobre las percepciones, los problemas y las prácticas de los profesores de inglés en clases de habilidades mixtas.

**Palabras claves:** percepción; práctica; habilidad mixta; aprendizaje de idiomas; ELT.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

English is widely recognized as a global language and a lingua franca, which has become increasingly essential due to the rapid development of science and technology, especially in the realm of telecommunication. As a result, effective communication skills and resources have become necessary for individuals to thrive in today's world. English is taught and learned as a first, second, or foreign language worldwide, as it is used for a variety of purposes.

English is widely used as a means of communication globally and is considered a lingua franca according to Harmer (2008, p.13). The emergence of science and technology, especially telecommunication tools, has made the mastery of the English language essential. The development of effective communication skills and resources has become a necessity in today's globalized era, as stated by Smith (1997, p.66). English language teaching and learning is prevalent as a first, second, or foreign language in many parts of the world. Awasthi, Bhattarai, and Khaniya (2009, p.3) contend that English is used in diverse contexts worldwide, not merely as a vehicle for reading and writing British and American literature.

Teaching and learning a language, especially when it is not one's native tongue, presents significant challenges for both teachers and learners. Language teaching in the twentieth century, according to Richards and Rogers (2005, p.1), was marked by frequent changes and innovation as a result of rival language teaching ideologies. Teaching English as a foreign language (ELT) has become more challenging due to mixed ability classes, where students have different learning abilities, as noted by Khati (2010, p.99). As a result, teaching in a multilevel setting is a significant challenge for ELT instructors, with each student learning and progressing at a different pace, and some may find the learning task more challenging than others.

To ensure quality education, teachers must address specific issues when teaching mixed ability classes, such as using appropriate techniques, authentic materials, and different activities that address the needs and interests of the students. They must also recognize that each student is unique and has specific learning needs. The classroom represents people from diverse social, educational, cultural, and political backgrounds, making teaching and learning English in such a diverse setting complex for language teachers. Mixed ability students are present in almost all classes in many institutions, both institutional and community, making it difficult for instructors to deal with the diversity of learning requirements. While some students may find the learning task straightforward, others may find it difficult to understand. Furthermore, each student comes from a different family and environment, which can create obstacles for teachers in reaching the students. Therefore, the most crucial challenge of such classes is to explore the common expectations of the students and decide on an appropriate level of instruction to ensure effective learning for all.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Mixed ability classes, where students with varying levels of competence in listening, reading, speaking and writing are placed together, are common in ELT classrooms worldwide. In such classes, teachers face challenges due to the diverse needs and expectations of the students, including differences in language competence, learning styles, cultural background, attitudes towards language, and motivation. For language teachers, guaranteeing equal access to materials, resources, and chances for classroom tasks, as well as assuring the success of all pupils, is complex problems. The author's research aimed to explore English teachers' perceptions and classroom practices towards mixed ability classes, given the challenges they pose for effective teaching and learning.

### **Objective of the Study**

The following are the research objectives:

- i. To study English language teachers' perceptions and behaviors regarding mixed ability classes,
- ii. To examine the challenges encountered by English language teachers in mixed ability classes and,
- iii. To provide pedagogical implications that could be implemented in such settings.

### **Research Questions**

The present research investigation aimed to address the following research inquiries:

- i. What are the English language teachers' perceptions towards mixed ability classes?
- ii. What pedagogical strategies do English language teachers employ when teaching mixed-ability classes?
- iii. How do English language teachers deal with the challenges posed by mixed ability classes?

## **Delimitations of the Study**

This research was conducted in Nepalgunj Sub-metropolitan city of Banke district, Nepal and was limited to five secondary schools where five English teachers were observed and interviewed. The major objective of this research was to look into the instructional strategies used by these instructors in mixed ability classes. Data was collected through classroom observations and instructor conversations.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Review of Theoretical Literature**

Mixed ability classes are a common phenomenon in Nepal, where teachers encounter learners with varying degrees of proficiency and abilities in their classrooms. This type of class is characterized by the presence of diverse learners, unlike homogeneous classes where learners have similar characteristics. As stated by Ur (2005), all classes with more than one learner are inherently heterogeneous, presenting unique challenges for both learners and teachers. Similarly, Dewan (2003) describes mixed ability courses as those that include students of various genders, maturities, professions, ethnic groups, cultural and economic backgrounds, and personalities.

Mixed ability classes consist of learners with different abilities and language levels, where learners exhibit varying learning styles and preferences (Bremner, 2008). Learners' competence, drive, requirements, hobbies, learning styles, and experiences may vary. (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2005). Richards (2004) argues that every class should be considered mixed ability, reflecting the diverse backgrounds and individual differences of the learners. In this setting, mixed ability courses in Nepal include students of various linguistic abilities, cultural backgrounds, learning styles, age, mindset toward the language, home tongue, and learning experiences. (Khati, 2010). Learners differ in their competence, motivation, needs, interests, and experiences, highlighting the challenges that teachers face in catering to the needs of all learners. Therefore, understanding the nature of mixed ability classes is essential for effective teaching and learning in diverse educational settings.

### ***Teaching in Mixed Ability Classes***

Mixed ability classes are common in education, involving students with different personalities, skills, interests, and learning needs. The main reason for mixed ability classes is the variation in learning speeds and motivation. Ur (2005, p.304) identifies several factors that influence learner differences and difficulty in teaching, including language learning ability, cultural background, learning styles, attitude toward the language, mother tongue, intelligence, learning experiences, age, gender, confidence, motivation, interest, self-discipline, and educational level. Teachers face challenges in teaching mixed ability classes, where students have a wide range of language proficiency levels, making it difficult to fit the learning needs of all individuals. To teach such classes, teachers should use different strategies, such as group work, pair work, and task adaptation. The interest in individual students is key to class satisfaction,

recognizing that each student has different ideas, expectations, and needs. Skehan (1998, p.65) thinks that mixed ability classrooms with successful and failed learners present a challenge for instructors due to technical issues such as degree of teaching, language, culture, and how various groups interact with one another. Therefore, as teachers, we need to value and appreciate diversity, recognizing that all students are different in their abilities, and create a conducive environment for mixed ability students to learn.

## **Issues in Mixed Ability Classes**

### ***Benefits of Mixed Ability Classes***

Mixed ability classes offer a rich variety of human resources, students' interaction, enhancing learner autonomy and professional development. According to Adhikari (2012), students from different cultural backgrounds bring diverse worldviews and values, providing different experiences and learning styles. This allows for student-centered teaching methods within the same classroom. In mixed ability classes, students learn from each other, help each other and interact, increasing their awareness and understanding of others. Teachers in mixed ability classes need to be creative and innovative, resulting in professional development. Though challenging, mixed ability classes have advantages in bringing different new ideas to the classroom.

### ***Teacher Strategies in Mixed Ability Classes***

Teachers must employ a variety of methods to handle the challenges of instructing mixed ability groups. It is important to recognize that they are teaching a group of individuals with diverse needs and abilities, rather than a homogeneous group. Various scholars and methodologies have suggested different teaching ideas and strategies for coping with the challenges of mixed ability classes. Appealing to all senses, having contingency plans, using in-class activities, assigning open-ended tasks, personalizing tasks, incorporating games, competitions, and dramatization, utilizing group/pair-work activities, assigning extra homework, and creating portfolios are some of the strategies suggested by scholars such as Coupur (2008), Ur (2005), Hess (2006), and Sharma (2006). By adopting these strategies, teachers can better cater to the diverse learning needs of students in mixed ability classes.

## **Review of Empirical Literature**

Butterworth (2010) used interviews and classroom observations to gather data on the condition of talented students in mixed-ability classes. The study found that teachers need training in how to manage mixed-ability students and to provide adequate support for gifted students. Additionally, utilizing various teaching strategies and methods may benefit all students.

Milan & Joyce (2010) conducted research on EFL teachers' perspectives regarding mixed-ability and streamed classes. They collected data through interviews and focused group discussions with English teachers in Japan, selected through non-random sampling. The majority of teachers preferred streamed

classes due to the perceived benefits to students, such as the ability to tailor lessons to their level. However, some teachers believed that mixed-ability classes could benefit lower-achieving students if a wide range of learning activities were provided.

Ghimire (2011) investigated English teachers' awareness of diversity in ELT classes, the challenges faced in diverse ELT classes, coping strategies, and students' perspectives. A questionnaire was used to gather data from 20 secondary level instructors from the Kathmandu valley using purposive non-random sampling. The study found that secondary level English teachers recognized diversity beyond certain ethnic and racial backgrounds and that diverse ELT classes presented challenges in determining appropriate instruction and tasks for students with varying language proficiency levels.

Dhakal (2012) analyzed teachers' skills in managing disruptive behavior in ELT classrooms in terms of procedures and rules, classroom organization, lesson movement, and communication. Non-random sampling was used to select eight teachers and twelve students from four higher secondary schools in Kaski district, and data were collected using a questionnaire, classroom observation checklist, and interview guidelines. The study found that effective communication was a key to managing disruptive behavior, but there was a gap between teachers' knowledge and classroom practice. Teacher characteristics influenced student behavior, and the techniques used to respond to behavior varied among teachers.

The studies discussed above have primarily focused on identifying the challenges and strategies employed in heterogeneous classes. However, there is a study gap in comprehending English instructors' views and behaviors regarding mixed ability classes. The uniqueness of this study lies in its specific focus on investigating how teachers perceive and practice teaching English language in mixed ability classes.

## **Research Methods and Procedures**

### **Design and Methodology of the Study:**

The study utilized a survey research design, incorporating a qualitative research approach to explore the strategies employed by teachers to teach mixed ability classes.

### **Population, Sample, and Sampling Strategy**

The population of this research included all secondary level English teachers from Nepalgunj Sub-metropolitan City in Banke District, Nepal. The study employed a judgmental non-random sampling procedure to select a sample of five secondary level English teachers from different schools.

### **Research Tools**

Interviews and classroom observation diaries were utilized as research tools for data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five selected teachers to explore their perceptions and

practices towards mixed ability classes. The interview schedule was designed with both predetermined and follow-up questions based on the teachers' responses. Classroom observations were conducted to observe the practices and activities of the five teachers during their classes.

### **Sources of Data**

Data for this research were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through conversations and classroom evaluations with the people involved. Secondary data, on the other hand, refers to data obtained from sources that have already been published. For this study, various secondary sources were utilized including books, journals, articles, and dissertations related to mixed ability classes. The primary data collection involved interviews with five different secondary level English teachers to gather information about their perceptions and practices regarding teaching in mixed ability classes. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted and recorded in a diary to document the teachers' practices in the classroom.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In order to carry out the primary data collection process of the research study, several procedures were implemented to obtain data for the research purpose. Firstly, five secondary level schools located in Nepalgunj Sub-metropolitan city of Banke district, Nepal were selected. Subsequently, the researcher visited the selected schools and discussed the research purpose and evidences with the authorities, and obtained permission to apply research tools for data collection. Once permission was obtained, one English teacher was selected from each of the five different schools. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the five selected teachers, and classroom observations were carried out using a classroom observation diary. The information gathered from interviews were recorded and later transcribed into written form. Finally, the researcher expressed gratitude to all concerned individuals who assisted in the process of data collection.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Following the collection of data through interviews and classroom observations with teachers, a systematic interpretation and analysis was conducted. The data obtained from the interviews and classroom observation diary were analyzed descriptively and presented thematically. The gathered data was organized into various categories and then descriptively examined and interpreted.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research work prioritized ethical considerations in order to respect the privacy and safety of the participants. The researcher ensured that every respondent was informed about the purpose and value of their participation and that their personal and institutional reputation would not be harmed. To achieve this, the researcher built rapport with the participants and provided them with a participant information

statement. The participants were assured that their identity would be kept confidential and that their names would not be mentioned in the thesis or any publications.

## **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS**

### **Perceptions of English Teachers towards Mixed ability Classes**

During the process of investigating English teachers' perspectives towards mixed ability classes, it was found that mixed ability classes consist of students who possess varying levels of proficiency. The study involved conducting interviews with secondary level English teachers to elicit their perceptions on teaching English in mixed ability classes. In response to this inquiry, the teachers highlighted the presence of diverse learners within a given class, with differences in language learning aptitude, cultural backgrounds, learning styles, age, mother tongue, and learning experiences. Furthermore, one of the interviewed teachers provided the following statement:

*Mixed ability classes are characterized by a diverse student population with varying abilities, participation levels, and performance outcomes. Each student has a unique background and individual potential. Additionally, students possess distinct learning needs and styles, and differ in their competencies, motivation for learning, interests, and experiences.*

This suggests that mixed ability classes include not only students of different abilities, but also individuals who have varied learning styles and tastes. According to one teacher, mixed ability groups are common in our educational environment and must be encountered by every teacher. Additionally, the teacher provided further insights by stating,

*A mixed ability class is a class where students of varying abilities are instructed together. In my class, there are evident discrepancies in students' levels, skills, fluency, interests, and experiences. Consequently, diverse learners exhibit their strengths at varying times based on the subject matter and the learning style utilized.*

Furthermore, another educator opined that the mixed ability class is characterized by a diverse range of language proficiency levels, thereby presenting a significant challenge in terms of tailoring lesson plans to meet the unique learning needs of each student. This observation is further supported by an experienced instructor who contributed to the discussion, stating that:

*Teaching in mixed ability classes presents challenges, but it also offers opportunities. My extensive experience of teaching students with diverse abilities in the same classroom has taught me that every individual brings unique and novel ideas. Students come from diverse cultural backgrounds, possess distinct worldviews, values, and life experiences, and have diverse learning styles. When they share their experiences with their peers, it helps the struggling students to improve, and also supports the teachers. Such student abilities enable teachers to apply a variety of student-centered methods in the same classroom.*



In the field of English Language Teaching, teachers have been confronting mixed ability classes in their classrooms. The vast majority of ELT classes are made up of students with different abilities, and as such, they are not homogeneous in terms of their abilities. These classrooms are receiving a considerable number of students with varying expectations. According to the teachers' shared experiences, the varied ability makeup of students in a classroom has offered both obstacles and possibilities. It is a common occurrence in our society and in the educational system to have many classes with mixed ability students.

### **Issues Faced by Teachers in Mixed ability Classes**

Based on the interviews and classroom observations, it was discovered that mixed ability classes pose a common challenge for English language teachers, who face various issues related to teaching and learning. In particular, the diverse learning styles and needs of students contribute to the complexity of mixed ability classes. Their views informed the identification and thematic presentation of the issues encountered in mixed ability classes.

#### ***Discipline***

During the interviews with different teachers regarding the challenges faced in mixed ability classes, discipline was identified as the most prominent issue. The teachers argued that students' diverse behaviors and attitudes make it difficult for them to maintain control and order in the classroom. In line with this, one teacher stated,

*Managing mixed ability classes can pose a challenge to teachers, particularly in terms of discipline. This challenge arises when students become frustrated, lose focus, become disinterested, or exhibit disruptive behavior. Such behavior may be attributed to the different levels of difficulty in the subject matter, with weaker students requiring more support from the teacher. Additionally, variations in emotional and learning abilities among students can contribute to the occurrence of discipline problems.*

The issue of discipline is commonly faced by teachers in mixed ability classes, according to an experienced teacher. Due to the different abilities of students, it becomes difficult for teachers to pay equal attention to every individual. Weaker students often engage in disruptive behavior when they feel frustrated or bored, which can create a discipline problem. Classroom observation revealed that when the teacher assigned tasks to students, the more advanced students finished the tasks quickly while others struggled.

#### ***Interest***

During the discussions on the challenges faced by teachers in mixed ability classes, several informants highlighted the issue of student interest. Specifically, one teacher commented that students in mixed ability classes vary not only in their abilities but also in their level of interest in the subject matter. According to this teacher, this can make it difficult to engage all students in the classroom and maintain their attention throughout the lesson. He stated:

*In mixed ability classes, students exhibit varying interests in terms of their attitudes towards the subject matter, their teacher, their language proficiency, and their personalities. It is observed that some students may perceive the lesson to be boring, while others may find it interesting. In situations where students lack interest in the topic being taught, they tend to lose concentration, which often results in classroom disruptions and a chaotic learning environment.*

Another teacher emphasized that students have unique interests and preferences, and they often choose topics to read or discuss based on their personal interests. This can result in some students being highly engaged and motivated in class, while others may struggle to maintain their interest and attention. Additionally, students may initiate debates or discussions related to their own interests, which can be challenging for teachers to navigate and incorporate into lesson plans. He added:

*In mixed ability classes, it is a challenging task for teachers to cater to the varied interests of all students. While attempts are made to incorporate topics of interest, it is often not feasible to include every student's preference. As a result, some students may become disengaged and disinterested, leading to boredom and lack of attention during lessons. Teachers face difficulty in providing content and activities that are motivating and interesting to all learners in such classrooms.*

During our discussion on the challenges faced by teachers in mixed ability classes, many of the participants emphasized the difficulty in maintaining the interest of all students in the classroom. As students in such classes may differ in their interests, it can be challenging for teachers to find topics and activities that engage and motivate all learners.

During classroom observation, students displayed a variety of interests, such as requesting to read stories or engaging in debates about their preferred topics. Some students even expressed interest in activities beyond the lesson, like playing music or going on outings. However, the teacher found it difficult to address all of their interests and keep them engaged during the lesson, leading to some students not paying attention. This highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing individual interests in a mixed ability class, as each student has unique ideas, expectations, and needs.

### **Selecting Appropriate Task and Materials**

Based on the data gathered through the interview and classroom observation, it has been identified that the issue of selecting appropriate tasks and materials is prevalent. The majority of the informants opined that the same task and materials are not suitable for all learners. This has resulted in teachers frequently encountering this challenge during their everyday teaching and learning process. One teacher, during the interview, specifically mentioned this issue:

*In classes comprising students of varying abilities, it has been observed that assigning the same task to all learners leads to ineffective outcomes. Faster students find the task easy, whereas slower ones struggle with it. Consequently, the lesson loses its efficacy and meaning. Selecting tasks that are appropriate for*

*all learners in a class can be confusing. Additionally, the selection of materials is intricately linked to the task, making it challenging to choose the most suitable materials for the task at hand.*

It shows that in mixed ability classes, students have varying abilities, making it confusing to assign tasks according to their levels. Similarly, preparing appropriate materials for all students is also challenging. During my observation of Teacher A's class, I noticed that the teacher assigned a paragraph writing task about school, but only a few students were able to complete it while others struggled. This suggests that not all students have the same level of writing proficiency, making it difficult for teachers to proceed according to their lesson plan. Additionally, in the case of materials, the teacher showed sentence cards for changing active sentences to passive, but some students were not familiar with the process, which posed a further challenge for the teacher.

### **Classroom Participation**

Through my study, I have identified that classroom participation is a significant issue in mixed ability classes. The majority of the respondents expressed that not all students participate equally in teaching and learning activities. One experienced teacher provided the following comment on this matter:

*Students have different habits, and some may be introverted while others may be extroverted. Consequently, while some students are prepared to participate in teaching and learning activities, others may hesitate to do so and may be reluctant to answer questions in class. As a result, classroom participation is not uniform across all students.*

It is evident that mixed ability classes present a common challenge, as students are grouped based on their age and year of study rather than their level of attainment or ability. As a result, there are clear differences in classroom participation among learners, posing a significant challenge for teachers.

During my interview with English teachers, it became apparent that students' motivation, ability, and proficiency levels impact their willingness to participate in the classroom. One of the teachers also expressed a similar sentiment. He stated:

*In my class, there are students with varying abilities. It is a common trend in my class that more advanced learners participate more actively than weaker learners. Consequently, weaker learners' proficiency in the subject is negatively impacted by their lack of participation or attention.*

During my classroom observation, I noted that weak and unmotivated students did not participate equally with their peers. Additionally, teachers tended to focus more on students who were more active in classroom participation, while being less concerned with those who were not equally engaged. Teachers frequently directed their questions towards the more extroverted students in the class, leaving introverted students as passive listeners.

According to the above analysis, not all students can engage equally in the classroom. Stronger students usually engaged more than less advanced students in mixed ability classes, possibly due to the latter group's shyness and fear of giving incorrect responses. As a result, teachers encounter difficulties in including all students equitably in teaching and learning tasks at their own speed. This lack of involvement or focus may have a detrimental effect on the proficiency of weaker learners in the topic.

### **Practices of Teachers in Mixed Ability Classes**

Teaching English in mixed ability classes is difficult for teachers, but it also represents the rich diversity of students with varying abilities. Teaching in mixed ability classes is difficult but not impossible, according to interviews with different informants. Teachers discussed their teaching methods, ideas, and practices for dealing with diverse ability classes. The skill of teachers to use different methods is crucial for success in mixed ability classes. Several methods for dealing with mixed ability classes have been found.

#### ***Variety in Topics, Methods and Texts***

During my research, I conducted interviews with several teachers and found that they employ various strategies to address the challenges of teaching mixed ability classes. An experienced teacher, whom I interviewed, with years of experience teaching mixed ability learners, shared his insights, stating:

*Diversity plays a crucial role in teaching as it enhances students' learning experience. In multilevel classes, where students have different learning styles, it is important to introduce new and varied teaching methods and topics to maintain their interest. As a teacher in mixed ability classes, I always strive to incorporate a variety of topics and methods to make the class engaging and to encourage active participation from all students. I believe that the use of varied tasks and methods is essential in promoting equal participation from students.*

In order to cater to the needs of all learners, teachers are encouraged to diversify their teaching approach by using various topics, methods, and activities. This allows for a more engaging and interesting classroom environment that caters to different learning styles. Through the use of varied tasks and methods, students are encouraged to actively participate in the class.

During a conversation on the same topic with another teacher, he argued that:

*In mixed ability classes, it is crucial to use a variety of activities and teaching methods that cater to the diverse needs of students. Teachers should aim to provide activities that develop different skills, so that all learners can succeed. Therefore, in my class, I frequently change the topics and teaching procedures to make sure that all levels of learners are engaged and interested in the teaching and learning activities.*

During classroom observation, it was observed that some teachers changed the topics within a class, while others used the same procedures from start to end of the class. A teacher was observed dividing

students into groups, assigning a team leader, and having two groups read a paragraph and two groups write five sentences about it. This was followed by having the other two groups read out the sentences they wrote. This procedure led to increased student participation.

### **Group work**

During the interview, several participants mentioned group work as an effective strategy in mixed ability classes for achieving both intellectual and social learning goals. One teacher elaborated,

*In mixed ability classrooms, students have different abilities and individual differences. To manage such diverse classes, the teacher can use group work as a strategy. Assigning group work tasks ensures that all students can participate and make mistakes, while working together towards a common goal. Group work is an important feature of teaching in heterogeneous classrooms, as it helps to control the classroom and engage all students. However, it is not clear how many teachers are familiar with this technique and use it in mixed ability classrooms.*

Another teacher stated during the interview, "Group work is an effective strategy for addressing common classroom issues, including student engagement and managing instruction for students with varying academic abilities." Additionally, the teacher provided further insights:

*I typically divide my class into different groups and assign them various tasks to work on. This allows for students to share ideas and even motivates weaker students to learn from their advanced peers. It is important to keep groups small enough so that everyone can participate in a task that has been clearly assigned.*

The teacher's opinion suggests that group work enables students to learn from one another, develop communication skills and build interpersonal relationships. During classroom observation, an experienced teacher divided the students into four groups based on their levels and assigned various tasks. The mixed-ability students actively participated in group discussions and learned from more advanced students.

### **Feedback and Motivation**

Continuous comments and incentive are essential for encouraging mixed ability students in the classroom. Motivated students are clearly more involved, persistent, and generate superior outcomes than unmotivated students. During the interview, one of the teachers highlighted the importance of student motivation in the class. He stated,

*Providing feedback and motivation are essential elements of effective classroom teaching. In my class, I regularly provide feedback to my students, which encourages their interest in learning. Additionally, I consistently motivate my students in all of their activities, which leads to increased learning and active participation in all teaching and learning activities.*

Furthermore, the teacher stated that obtaining motivation from a student is not a simple task, particularly when the student is not initially motivated. Some students may be fatigued by school or dealing with significant personal issues. He continued to explain that in such cases, the teacher must be empathetic and understanding towards the student's situation, and attempt to develop a positive and supportive learning environment to encourage student motivation:

*Students who come from privileged family and social backgrounds tend to be more motivated in the classroom. However, as a teacher, I make an effort to motivate all my students, though it is important that the motivation comes from within the student. Sometimes students may lack motivation due to personal or external factors.*

In the study, all teachers were observed to be using motivation and feedback in their classroom. Teachers shared motivating stories and examples to inspire their students while also providing feedback to correct their mistakes. The study suggests that feedback and motivation are crucial in enhancing students' engagement and self-confidence in the learning process. Teachers who provide feedback show their students that they care about their progress, leading to better learning outcomes.

## **Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Findings**

Based on the data analysis and interpretation, the following results about the views, issues, and behaviors of English instructors in mixed ability classes have been identified:

#### ***The Perception of English Teachers towards Mixed-Ability Classes***

- The majority of teachers find mixed-ability classes to be a challenging task. Students in such courses have different degrees of competence, as well as variations in language learning aptitude, cultural background, learning style, age, mother tongue, and learning experiences.
- Teachers perceive mixed-ability classes as having a rich diversity of learners, each with unique needs, learning styles, competencies, and interests.
- Mixed-ability classes are a common occurrence, and every teacher must confront this situation where students with different abilities are taught together in the same class.
- Teachers acknowledge that, although teaching in mixed-ability classes is challenging, it also has positive aspects. Students with differing abilities, for example, in the same classroom, can offer different and novel concepts.
- Mixed-ability classes, on the other hand, include students with a variety of learning styles and tastes, ethnic backgrounds with varying worldviews and beliefs, and a wide spectrum of learning experiences.

### ***Issues in Mixed-Ability Classes***

The study found that mixed-ability classes are a common occurrence and present various challenges to teachers in their English language teaching and learning. Teachers find it difficult to cater to the varying levels of understanding among students and guide them according to their pace. Managing the class and checking homework assignments is a particularly challenging task. Active students tend to remain engaged, while passive students require equal attention. Additionally, teachers face issues related to different learning styles and needs among students in mixed-ability classes. The study identifies various other issues as well.

- Teachers in mixed-ability classes face issues with maintaining discipline due to diverse student habits, attitudes, and activities based on cultural, social, and family backgrounds.
- Paying equal attention to all students is difficult for teachers, resulting in a chaotic classroom.
- Keeping all students interested is challenging as they have varying interests, attitudes towards the subject matter, language knowledge, and personality.
- Assigning the same task and using the same materials is not suitable for all learners, making the lesson ineffective and meaningless.
- Some students participate less actively due to shyness or fear of getting the answer wrong.
- Correcting students' mistakes consumes a lot of time, especially for students with many errors.
- Providing different techniques to suit individual needs is challenging and impractical in practice.

### ***Practices in Mixed Ability Classes***

I have learned that teaching in mixed-ability classes presents challenges, but it is not impossible. Teachers use a variety of strategies in their classrooms to cope with the rich diversity of students. Teachers share their teaching methods, ideas, and coping strategies for mixed-ability groups, and the effectiveness of these strategies is dependent on the teacher's ability to use them successfully. Based on the collected information, the following practices were identified as the main strategies for coping in mixed-ability classes.

- To make the class interesting and increase student participation, learners expected new or varied reading topics and teaching methods. A variety of tasks and methods enhanced their involvement and interest in teaching and learning activities at all levels.
- Assigning tasks to groups formed on the basis of their levels was found to be an effective strategy in mixed ability classes. Such group activities encouraged active participation, discussions and learning among mixed ability students.
- Pair work was found to be more effective for students to share and learn ideas without hesitation. Communicative activities in pairs were also more effective in promoting learning.
- In diverse classrooms, it is important to identify and adapt lessons to students' personal strengths, needs, and interests. Varying the method and assignments to adjust to these factors can help engage and involve students.

- Dividing students into small groups was found to be more effective in mixed ability classes. It provided the teacher with more time to help each student and adjust the teaching. Students felt more confident sharing their ideas with both the teacher and their peers.
- Giving feedback during the learning process increased learning and improved student outcomes. It also allowed students to become more engaged and involved in the classroom. Motivation was equally important for enhancing their self-confidence.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the end, this qualitative study investigated English teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward mixed ability classes. To select schools and teachers, non-random sampling was used, and data was gathered through questionnaires and classroom observations. According to the research, mixed ability classes are prevalent, and teachers view them differently. Because each student has unique proficiency, interests, and levels, a mixed ability class is a varied setting. This diversity, however, poses a number of challenges for teachers, including discipline, selecting suitable duties and resources, classroom involvement, correction, and time management. Despite these difficulties, the research demonstrated that instructing mixed aptitude groups is not impossible. Group work, pair work, differentiated teaching, separating the class into aptitude classes, feedback, and incentives were all used by teachers. More study is needed in areas such as the responsibilities of students and teachers in mixed ability classes and at various stages of education.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is expected that the summary and conclusions of the findings will be utilized at the levels mentioned below.

### **Policy Related**

The recommendations for policy related to this research are as follows:

- Providing regular practical and skill-based training, seminars, and workshops to all ELT teachers to assist them in adapting their teaching strategies for mixed ability classes.
- Training and encouraging secondary level English teachers by the government or other concerned authorities on the usefulness of pair/group work, debate, group discussion, language games, and motivation for teaching heterogeneous students.
- Ensuring that teachers are well-versed in the procedures for presenting lessons in mixed ability classes.
- Implementing frequent observation and monitoring programs in ELT classrooms by authorized agencies to assist teachers in teaching mixed ability learners.
- Offering proper salary and additional benefits to teachers based on their workload, which would motivate them to provide extra time to less advanced students.



## Practice Related

The research provides various recommendations at the practice level, which are outlined as follows:

- Teachers should possess the competence to handle mixed ability classes by staying up-to-date with new teaching strategies and procedures.
- Teachers should be well-acquainted with different practices such as language games, simple English, and pair/group work in the classroom setting.
- Teachers can conduct action research to determine the effectiveness of pair/group work, language games, and group discussion in teaching students with mixed abilities.

## Further Research Related

The present research sought to examine the practices and difficulties faced by English teachers in mixed ability classes. Therefore, this study may have some limitations. However, it does identify some pertinent areas for future research, which are presented below:

- Other researchers can investigate additional topics related to mixed ability classes, such as the roles of students and teachers in such classrooms.
- Since this study only focuses on secondary level teachers, future researchers could explore mixed ability classes at different educational levels such as primary, lower secondary, bachelor, and master levels.

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