

Challenges and Strategies of Teaching English to Mixed-Ability Classes: A Study of Five Tunisian Preparatory Schools

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Abstract

This study investigated challenges faced by teachers and the strategies used in instructing mixed-ability classes. It involved 50 full-time Tunisian EFL teachers. They were randomly selected from five preparatory schools in Greater Tunis. Half of the participants were females. They were aged between 23 and 60 years old. A survey questionnaire was adapted from Al-subaiei (2017). The results showed that Teachers of mixed-ability classes faced many challenges. This entailed a thorough understanding of each student's preferred learning styles, strengths, and areas of improvement. Teachers have used several methods, such as flexible grouping, grading tasks etc. In addition, teachers stressed the importance of a good cooperative learning environment to guarantee students' progress. Adopting these strategies would not only help teachers overcome the difficulty of managing diversity but also remodel students' diversity into a real asset for improving the learning experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, English has gained a snowballing popularity in Tunisia and has become the most important foreign language (Abdeljaoued, 2023). English teaching has been employed from primary to tertiary levels. Language learners in general have a variable rather than a uniform linguistic competence. To be more specific, Tunisian English classes almost invariably include pupils of a very wide range of abilities, motivations, learning styles, and needs. Owing to these differences among learners, many classes succeed or fail according to the tutor's skill in responding to these challenges (Nget et al. 2020). The Tunisian syllabus focuses on the learner at the center of the educational process. In a nutshell, there is a widely spread assumption that the problem of teaching a mixed-ability class is exacerbated by the pupils' ability in the English language. Yet, little research has been done in the Tunisian context regarding teaching English to mixed-ability classes. Using a survey, this study aims to fill in this research gap and understand some of the difficulties Tunisian teachers of English face and the strategies they use when teaching students with varying abilities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is argued that almost every language class includes learners of different abilities, interests, and needs (Ansari, 2013). Tunisian classes are not an exception, of course. The problem of mixed-ability classes exists for several reasons. First, Students come from different learning backgrounds. It is a matter of fact that some students in Tunisia have studied more English than others at the primary school level. Another factor that determines students' learning backgrounds is the very focus of their English teachers themselves. In other words, different teachers may emphasize different language skills. Second, students have different strategies or ways of knowing. It is well known that there are 8 multiple intelligences. This means, different students respond differently to the teacher's styles and approaches to teaching. For instance, some language learners may prefer a visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), kinaesthetic (moving), or tactile (touching) way of learning. Third, students have different attitudes towards learning English: Students' perceptions of the target language would inevitably determine their language levels. Accordingly, students may have either negative or positive attitudes towards English. This is mainly dependent on factors like previous experience with the language.

There are several challenges to teaching mixed-ability classes. Foremost among these challenges are the teaching materials (Xiao, 2020). Most textbooks are designed for an ideal homogeneous classroom. Previous research has shown that students react differently to the textbooks due to their differences (Faber et al., 2017). On the one hand, some students will automatically find the textbook easy and interesting.

On the other hand, some other students will find it difficult and boring. The second challenge is related to classroom participation. It is assumed that the classroom setting is the sole environment for many foreign language learners to practice the language. Some students are extroverts and try to benefit from this chance as much as possible, while others tend to be more introverts and find it difficult to speak in the target language for several reasons. Foremost among these reasons are interests, confidence, and knowledge. Finally, Interests and discipline are challenges for teaching mixed-ability classes. Students may develop different attitudes towards English or even the teacher. Previous experience with the language (good/ bad grades) and familiarity with the topic in each lesson could be other determining factors to reveal students' problems. Besides, teachers might find disciplinary problems in their classrooms. For example, some students certainly finish the assigned task or activity before others. These brighter students may misbehave while waiting for others to finish the task (McDermott & Zerr, 2019). By knowing how to deal with these challenging situations, teachers can create a more fruitful learning environment that caters to all students.

2.1. Research Questions

1. What are the obstacles encountered by educators of English as a Foreign Language in classrooms with mixed-ability students?
2. What approaches do these educators utilize to manage such obstacles?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample/Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 50 full time Tunisian EFL teachers. They were randomly selected from five preparatory schools in Greater Tunis.

Table1. Participants' demographic information

Demographic		Number of Respondents
Gender	Male	25
	Female	25
Age	23-30	7
	30-40	15
	40-50	23
	50-60	5
Teaching experience	Less than 1 year	08
	1-5 years	13
	5-10 years	14
	More than 10 years	15

3.2. Data collection and analysis

A quantitative research design was employed in this study. To collect data, a survey questionnaire was administered to 50 Tunisian EFL teachers. The development and adaptation of this survey tool were informed by the contributions of Al-Subaiei (2017). Given the quantitative nature of this study, the collected data underwent analysis utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics were applied, specifically examining the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of the teachers' responses.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Challenges faced by teachers

Table2: Teaching and Learning:

Description	Mean	S.D
1. The pacing guide isn't effective for addressing individual student needs.	3.01	0.77
2. Many students, especially low achievers, struggle with English communication.	3.80	0.45
3. There's a significant disparity between students' skills and levels.	2.87	0.91
4. Coursebook activities aren't tailored to suit the different levels of the students.	4.10	0.33
5. It's challenging to create a balanced lesson that suits all students.	4.19	0.27
6. I'm unable to meet the needs of every student.	2.78	0.81
7. Overall	3.45	0.59

Note: Interpretation of Mean scores 1.00-1.80 = Lowest ; 1.81-2.60 = Low ; 2.61-3.40 = Moderate ; 3.41-4.20 = High ; and 4.21-5.00 Highest.

Results from the likert scale show that most items were rated as moderate, except item 4 and item 5, which were high. In addition, the overall score ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.81$) was also moderate. This suggests that the conditions in mixed-ability classrooms may not be fully satisfactory for both teachers and students. Table2 reveals that the biggest challenge for teachers was to create a balanced lesson that suits all students.

Table 3. Students' motivation

No	Description	Mean	SD
1	A number of students were unable to communicate in class due to their lack of self-confidence.	4.10	0.77
2	Students with limited language proficiency tend to lose interest quickly.	3.32	0.81
3	Fast learners may become less interested if lessons are made simpler for the benefit of slow learners.	3.41	0.71
4	A number of students in the classroom do not possess confidence.	3.95	0.73
5	Slow learners in mixed-ability classrooms often feel unfairly treated.	3.42	0.69
6	It is challenging to guarantee that every student remains both interested and challenged.	3.65	0.83
7	Fast learners in mixed-ability classrooms believe they are not receiving equitable treatment.	3.45	0.76
8	Overall	3.61	0.75

Table 3 clearly reveals that the participants' overall performance was high ($M=3.61$, $SD=0.75$). Besides, almost all items were rated high, except item 2, which was moderate. This means that, related to students' motivation, the biggest challenge teachers faced was dealing with students who lack self-confidence.

Table 4. Materials

no	Description	Mean	SD
1	Achieving a shared learning outcome across students with diverse abilities through differentiated activities presents a significant hurdle.	3.80	0.71
2	Rigid lesson plans hinder my ability to adjust my teaching methods to accommodate diverse activities.	3.59	0.77

no	Description	Mean	SD
3	The teacher's guide offers little assistance for managing mixed-ability classrooms.	3.68	0.81
4	Textbooks often fail to address the learning requirements of students who are either struggling or excelling, as they focus on the average.	3.87	0.76
5	The availability of appropriate teaching resources for mixed-ability groups is limited.	3.77	0.68
6	I struggle to consistently create or modify a diverse range of teaching materials.	3.81	0.72
7	Overall	3.75	0.74

Table 4 clearly reveals that the participants' overall performance was high ($M=3.75$, $SD=0.74$), since all items were rated high. This means that teachers were not satisfied with the teaching materials. They suggested that the Tunisian Ministry of Education, as well as English language inspectors need to present and help teachers with updated learning materials. In conclusion, the overall teachers' perceptions were high. This means that teaching and learning activities, students' motivation, and teaching materials need more improvement.

4.2. Teaching strategies used in mixed-ability classes

Table5. Teaching and learning

no	Description	Mean	SD
1	Explaining the objective or purpose of the assigned homework.	3.95	0.73
2	Regular observations of teaching practices.	3.54	0.68
3	Consistently writing the lesson's learning objectives on the board.	3.75	0.81
4	Planning to observe a few students while circulating throughout the classroom.	3.49	0.74
5	Implementing creative assignments.	4.02	0.87
6	Creating vocabulary flashcards to enhance reading proficiency.	4.12	0.76
7	Collaborating with students to summarize the key points of the lesson.	3.45	0.84
8	Offering supplemental instruction to certain students.	4.56	0.73
9	Engaging in the mutual exchange of ideas with fellow teachers.	3.84	0.67
10	Teaching students on the significance of effective note-taking.	4.20	0.87
11	Presenting students with activities that involve information gaps.	3.87	0.75
12	Utilizing stories and folktales with varying levels of complexity.	3.65	0.86

no	Description	Mean	SD
13	Motivating students to re-tell or re-create narratives.	3.94	0.59
14	Combining compulsory assignments with optional tasks.	3.87	0.87
15	Implementing dictation exercises at multiple difficulty levels.	3.68	0.91
16	Incorporating drama and sketching activities to foster a stress-free atmosphere.	3.87	0.66
17	Providing students a selection of tasks from which they can choose.	4.45	0.75
18	Involving students with lower proficiency levels in English Club activities.	3.88	0.89
19	Overall	3.89	0.77

Table5 shows that participants rated items as high or highest. The overall items were rated high ($M=3.89$, $SD= 0.77$). This means that the participants are satisfied with the teaching and learning activities. A brief look at table5, table6 and table7 reveals that classroom management strategies ($M=3.89$, $SD= 0.76$) were equally important for teachers as teaching and learning ($M=3.89$, $SD= 0.77$). This means that learning is basically more affected by teachers themselves rather than the materials used. This stresses the importance of teachers' training.

Table6. Classroom management

no	Description	Mean	SD
1	Addressing students by their names fosters respect and improves their engagement.	3.85	0.78
2	Engaging high achievers in classroom activities saves teacher time.	3.47	0.57
3	Clear communication through voice projection enhances understanding and captures student attention.	4.10	0.83
4	Allowing students sufficient time to copy key information from the whiteboard is beneficial.	4.03	0.79
5	Close collaboration with struggling students helps sustain their motivation.	3.20	0.87
6	Offering additional activities to students who complete tasks ahead of schedule keeps them engaged.	4.10	0.77
7	Varying instructional pace and complexity caters to diverse learning needs.	3.91	0.76
8	Visual aids like pictures and art can effectively attract students attention.	4.05	0.85

no	Description	Mean	SD
9	Organizing students into groups to create different shapes promotes collaborative learning.	4.13	0.73
10	Changing partners encourages broader interaction.	3.37	0.81
11	Tailoring assignments to individual student's needs enhances learning.	4.28	0.72
12	Implementing group projects with mixed abilities promotes peer learning and collaboration.	4.12	0.74
13	Using peer tutoring within the classroom provides individualized support.	3.97	0.78
14	Overall	3.89	0.76

Table 6 shows that almost all items, except item 5 and item 10, were rated high with an overall mean of 3.89 and a standard deviation of 0.76. This reveals that classroom management enhances learning if teachers tailor assignments to individual student's needs and encourage collaborative learning.

Table7. Teaching materials

Description	Mean	SD
Employing simplified resources that are adaptable for all students.	3.84	0.81
Using materials suitable for various proficiency levels.	3.57	0.76
Preparing teaching handouts before the beginning of the term.	3.91	0.97
Implementing open-ended tasks.	3.68	0.87
Incorporating Jigsaw cooperative learning activities.	3.09	0.81
Engaging students in communicative activities.	4.01	0.79
Supplementing course textbooks with more authentic, real-world materials.	3.98	0.73
Overall	3.84	0.82

Table 7 shows that teachers rated item 5 as moderate. All the other items were rated high. In other words, teachers were not satisfied with the materials, which they think needed some improvements like supplementing textbooks with more authentic, real-world materials, and Engaging students in communicative activities

5. DISCUSSIONS

The results reveal that teaching mixed-ability classes represents several challenges for Tunisian EFL teachers. The findings are in line with some previous studies in different contexts (Heng et al. 2023; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Challenges are due to differences among learners in motivation, attitudes, knowledge, speed, styles of learning, and so forth. Consequently, teachers should be able to differentiate between their groups and help learners achieve their learning potential. Teachers of mixed-ability classes must be familiar with language teaching methodologies and build upon their resources freely in order to vary their approaches, as well as their teaching styles Nunan (1998). Teachers can find out about their pupils' preferred learning styles and preferences concerning the kind of classroom activities, as well as the teacher behavior, grouping through a simplistic way by carrying out needs analysis and handing out questionnaires. In addition, scaffolding is very beneficial. Differentiated instruction should be well organized, well planned, and address not only different levels but also different interests, learning styles, needs, and strengths of the learners (Tomlinson, 2005).

Good classroom management is a prerequisite for success in a mixed-ability class, as organizing classrooms effectively would maximize the chances of success in learning among pupils. Two suggestions are possible when dealing with a mixed-ability class. We can group either stronger students together, or group weak students with strong students according to the task in focus or the class dynamics. It is very easy for high achievers and extrovert students to dominate the classroom. So, the teacher's role lies in involving low achievers and introverts as well through establishing eye contact with all the students, involving the weaker students hiding at the back, and nominating weaker students to answer easier questions.

It is of crucial importance that all students are given help to develop good learning habits in a mixed-ability class. In other words, learners should be well-trained to learn and develop autonomously. Students are encouraged to take self-responsibility for their own learning. Students' classroom participation can be enhanced by good classroom management skills so that students of all levels (weaker and stronger) have a sense of ownership of the classroom. Also, a group monitor could be appointed when students are working in groups. The latter should encourage members of his/her group to participate in discussions using English and not their mother tongue. Finally, students' project works should be displayed with their names clearly visible. This is meant to encourage students to have a sense of pride in their work, and be more motivated to produce better work in the future.

Teachers agreed on the importance of grading tasks for students. The idea of grading tasks is that pupils of different levels work on the same task but with different difficulty levels. Grading tasks can apply to the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Grading tasks aimed at involving all students and challenging them at an appropriate level of difficulty.

In conclusion, teachers of mixed-ability classes have to cater to the different learning speeds. For instance, teachers can ask fast finishers to check their work alone or with another fast finisher before correction. This excellent opportunity for peer-correction would help foster a sense of cooperation among learners. Also, teachers should think of extension activities for fast finishers; otherwise, they would become restless and even disruptive if they are left doing nothing.

In addition, motivation has a direct effect on learning. In a mixed-ability class, it is believed that the weaker students are those with the least motivation; therefore, teachers should endeavor to do this through using visuals, posters, and creating a positive learning atmosphere. The latter would create a sense of group cohesion, co-operation, tolerance, and mutual support. Such a good environment paves the way for learners to be more open to learning and to share positive attitudes towards the target language. It is highly recommended that teachers provide opportunities for learners to get to know each other by encouraging group work and condemning misbehavior, such as laughing at the weaker students.

Furthermore, Clear instructions must be provided to the whole class. Probably, weak students should be given more attention when explaining tasks. Here again, stronger students can be used to explain the task in their own words to the rest of the class (Pedersen & Kronborg, 2014). In this way, it could be guaranteed, at least in a satisfactory way, that the whole class is a hands-on task. As far as error correction is concerned, weak students should not be over-corrected since this may affect their confidence and participation. Students are encouraged to correct one another instead.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The participants in this study faced the same challenges in teaching mixed-ability classes. The biggest challenge was to create a balanced lesson that suits all students. Also, they agreed that the coursebook activities aren't tailored to suit the different levels of the students. They confirmed that textbooks often fail to address the learning requirements of students who are either struggling or excelling, as they focus on the average. Another big challenge teachers faced was enhancing students' motivation, especially those who lack self-confidence. As far as strategies are concerned, the participants from the five schools stressed the importance of providing students a selection of tasks from which they can choose and offering supplemental instruction to certain students. Concerning classroom management, teachers thought that tailoring assignments to individual students' needs enhances learning. Also, they believed that organizing students into groups promotes collaborative learning. Finally, the participants agreed that engaging students in communicative activities was extremely important.

From a teaching point of view, the important thing is not whether teachers elect to base their teaching on specific course books or whether they reserve the right to interpret, select, and use the types of classroom activities that can cater for (or be designed to cater for) the intelligence profiles of their particular learner group. It is far more important for teachers to recognise the fact that learners are, in fact, different and therefore may need different types of classroom activities and techniques to learn. Only in doing so can teachers fully

encourage their learners to try harder and, at the same time, make the learning environment as meaningful and enjoyable as possible for all parties involved.

In a nutshell, the key strategies for teaching mixed-ability classes are developing a positive and collaborative working atmosphere and providing different activities suitable for different levels (Gwozdz, 2020). Furthermore, as teachers of mixed-ability classes, we should keep in mind that we are teaching a group of thirty different pupils, not a single pupil with different faces. In other words, teachers should base their teaching on their students' different needs, interests, aptitudes, learning styles, and so forth. It doesn't work to stick one's head in the sand and pretend the class is all of one homogenous level, a situation that doesn't exist anywhere.

Like other studies, this study has some limitations, such as the small number of schools, only five schools. Also, the number of participants is relatively small. Thus, a more ambitious research would focus on a larger sample. In addition, a mixed-methods design is also welcomed.

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APPENDIX 1 : TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

AL-SUBAIEI (2017)

Question1: How often do you face the following challenges?

1.Teaching and Learning:

- Following the pacing guide does not help me to follow individual students.
- Many students are unable to communicate using English especially low achievers.
- There is a wide gap among students' levels in different skills.
- The course books' activities do not suit the different levels of the students.
- It is difficult to plan a balanced lesson that fits all students with their different abilities.
- I cannot satisfy the needs of all students.

2.Motivation:

- Lack of confidence with some students leads them not to communicate in class.
- Some students quickly lose interest as they have a very low language ability.
- Simplifying the lesson for low ability students decreases good students' interest.
- There is a lack of motivation among some students in the class.
- Low-level students feel they are treated unequally in mixed ability classes.
- It is difficult to ensure that all students are challenged and interested.
- High-level students feel they are treated unequally in mixed ability classes.

3.Materials:

- It is difficult to design different activities for different levels to achieve the same goal.
- Fixed lesson plans prevent us from adapting various activities.
- The teacher's book does not support me with effective strategies to deal with mixed-ability classes.
- Course books are designed solely for average learners, neglecting high and low achievers.
- It is difficult to find appropriate teaching resources for different levels.
- It is difficult for me to design or adapt different materials regularly.

Question2: How often do you use the following strategies?

1.Classroom management:

- Calling students by their names to make them feel respected and to pay attention.
- Involving high-level students in class management to save teacher's time.
- Varying voice to make the meaning clear and to get the students' attention.
- Giving students time to copy important information from the board.
- Working closely with low-level students to motivate them.
- Giving extra activities to the group or the students who finish earlier.
- Varying the pace and level of instructions.
- Using art and images to attract students' attention.
- Students sit in groups forming different shapes.
- Changing pairs from time to time.
- Personalizing tasks (students talk about themselves and their experiences).
- Assigning mixed-ability group project (students get different roles while working on the project).
- Using in-class peer-tutoring.

2.Materials:

- Using simplified materials that are not demanding for low-level students.
- Using a bank of materials at the ELI with activities of different levels.
- Preparing handouts before the beginning of the semester.
- Adapting open-ended tasks (summary, analysis, express opinions).
- Applying Jigsaw activities (each student is doing a part).
- Using more communicative activities (games, puzzles, etc.)
- Using more authentic materials beside the course book.

3.Teaching and learning:

- Explaining the purpose of homework for the students.
- Regular class observations among teachers.
- Writing the aims of the lesson on the board regularly.
- Planning to observe 3 or 4 students every day while walking around the class.
- Applying creative tasks that allow students to work at their levels (story, opinion, diary).
- Designing vocabulary cards to improve reading ability.
- Summarizing the lesson with the students.
- Giving extra lessons for some students.
- Exchanging ideas with other teachers
- Teaching students the importance of note taking.
- Providing students with information gap activities
- Using different levels of stories and folktales.
- Encouraging students to reconstruct stories.
- Mixing compulsory with optional tasks.
- Applying multilevel dictation (blank sheet of paper, a medium level cloze and a cloze with only a few blanks).
- Having drama and sketch (miming, role play, etc.) in class to have a stress-free environment.
- Providing a menu of work for the students and they choose.
- Involving low-level students in English Club Activities.