Learners' Diversity in EFL Classrooms: A Study with Reference to Online Classes

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Abstract

Diversity in the classroom refers to the inclusion of students from different gender, cultural background, diverse learning styles, and socioeconomic status. Diversity interrupts the learning process and affects the way the students learn. This raises the need for the EFL teachers to use diverse teaching pedagogies to provide their students a relevant, multifaceted, wide-ranging, and flexible instruction that benefits all types of learners, irrespective of their cognitive abilities, gender, socio-economic status, etc. Thus, the objective of this research is to understand the effectiveness of online forums in addressing some of the challenges faced by students learning English as a foreign language. ESL learners, belonging to miscellaneous contexts conveyed their idea of participation in the online forums and shared their experiences during the online platforms. The Data in this paper is collected from the interviews of selected learners of focused groups. In the end, this paper will share some of the findings of a study on students' reactions to online classes along with discussing several positive efforts made by both instructors and learners both.

Keywords: Language learning, Learner diversity, EFL, Online classes, teaching, learning.

Introduction:

People differ because of their distinctive characteristics. Race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, ability, age, religious belief, or political conviction are all examples of variety. All of these factors are to be considered how students respond to a particular learning environment. When students come to a class, they bring along with them a multitude of dissimilarities. These individual differences classify them as diverse learners. Though most teachers are aware of these differences or diversities and adopt necessary pedagogies to make the classroom inclusive in relation to teaching and learning.

At the present time, teachers all around the world have to deal with diverse classrooms, and educators need to be very well prepared to instruct these diverse students. Every learner has their own set of personal and cultural experiences, schooling types and methods, likes and dislikes, financial backgrounds, and preferred methods of learning. (Fehr & Agnello,2012). All these different sources of diversity affect the way students learning styles.

Learner diversity is indeed a great challenge to present-day teachers and to meet this challenge, teachers need to equip themselves with sound teaching methods and culturally supported pedagogy. Every teacher should have a profile of each student in his/her class and this profile should provide all the possible information about each student. This information should help the teacher to identify the differences among the students in the class. Dimitrova et al. (2003) identify the following as the main differences among learners in general:

- Ethnicity, gender, religion, disability;
- Language, culture, communities;
- Prior domain knowledge;
- Personal motivation, and expectations; and
- Social contexts and learner's personal lifestyle.

Frequently teachers miss to include such information about the diversity of the learners in planning their language lessons. This could be a number of factors as follows:

- Teachers' lack of awareness about learner diversity and its consequences on second language learning
- A limited number of contact hours allotted for English language teaching and learning
- The student-teacher ratio in the class
- Teachers overloaded with administrative work

Literature Review

The research was basically aimed at gauging the effectiveness of online forums in addressing some of the problems faced by students learning English as a Foreign language.

Learner Diversity has always been a major concern in the English as a foreign language classroom. Due to the diversities, students often find themselves in very different stages of learning in the same class. Teachers are well aware of the problem but due to a large number of students in the class, given a very limited contact hours and a very strict exam-oriented education system, they are not able to help diverse learners. The weak students, who need more attention and guidance, are often neglected due to the teacher's main concentration on the intelligent and the mediocre students and constraint of time.

However, it is not impossible. First of all, the step is to be taken to identify those differences. Diversity can be traced out through many sources, such as religious conviction, race, socio-economic background, family structure, intellectual capability, social status, educational background, learning styles, learning abilities, and many others.

Each student has different cognitive skills, such as information processing, logic & reasoning, and problem-solving, critical thinking (Burden, 2010). According to Howard Gardner (1999), human beings have various kinds of intelligence named logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, existential, and naturalistic. Each person has an exclusive IQ and each type of intelligence involves different ways of learning and communicating (Gardner, 1999).

Different pedagogies can increase students learning by accessing their individual learning styles. This is especially important when teachers have slow learners or fast learners in class.
Slow learners usually have limited attention spans and find it difficult to learn from instructional materials designed for the majority of students, such as texts and workbooks (Burden, 2010). Thus, teachers need to adapt teaching methods to cater to the cognitive abilities and needs of these students. When teachers provide slow learners with different types of instructional materials and assessment tools, these students have the opportunity to show their real knowledge and skills. For example, when teachers introduce collaborative and cooperative groups teaching pedagogies even low-level students contribute with their ideas.

This is another important source of diversity. According to Woolfolk (2007), a learning style denotes the "individual preference for the conditions of the learning process" (p. 202). Thus, learning styles include working alone, with co-workers or in groups, in a quiet place or with noise, while sitting still or moving around (Dunn, 1993). Brain hemispheric condition also affects the student's fondness for learning situations. For example, left-brain dominant people are more logical and analytical; as a result, they prefer concrete and sequential instruction. Right-brain dominant people on the other hand, prefer to learn through visual tools and hands-on experiences. (Burden, 2010).

Learning preferences are usually shaped by the culture and the social background in which each individual lives (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Each culture has its own values, philosophies, attitudes, rules, ways of thinking, and perceptions of the world. All these factors affect the way students learn styles. That is why teachers need to make sure that each student from every cultural group prospers. When teachers are approachable to the students' cultural diversity

in class, all the students benefit. For example, while using the books which address issues of diversity in class, the student's identity and cultural beliefs are acknowledged. They see themselves and their ethnicity represented in those books and examples. When inclusion and diversity are promoted in education, there are positive results throughout the education system. In general, it facilitates the development of more culturally receptive education systems.

This suggests that, even though not all students who belong to a certain cultural group or country have equal needs or preferences, teachers still need to be aware of these cultural and individual likings in order to become accustomed to the instruction as per the requirements of students and encourage them to actively participate in learning.

Socioeconomic status states to the position of the family within the society, determined by the parents' profession, earnings, or level of education. Students' overall performance in college, their scores, and rankings are correlated to their socioeconomic status.

These students usually have low self-esteem and do not understand the importance of education in their lives. Therefore, those students who belong to a low socioeconomic status tend to be at greater risk of dropping out of formal education (Woolfolk, 2007). The learners who belong to middle-class or working-class families usually go to public schools, characterized by large classes, absence of individualized attention to students, few elective courses, unqualified teachers, and few opportunities for innovative work. In general, those students are taught to get similar jobs to those of their parents and relatives.

Regardless of the challenges, thoughtful teachers try to understand the situations of these students and adjust the curriculum and instruction to cater to their needs. A study conducted by Flaherty and Hackler (2010) clearly demonstrates the importance of implementing tailored instruction in these instances. The objective of their research was to investigate if varied education improved students' motivation and achievement. Participants in their study had low socioeconomic level and no parental assistance. At the beginning of the research, Academics, according to the students, were not as enjoyable as other interests or activities. Classroom teachers noted high signs of incomplete schoolwork, low classroom participation, low motivation, poor study habits, inefficiency, and low academic achievement. Thus came to the conclusion that by using differentiated instruction in the classroom, and diverse groupings for class activities as a teaching strategy, teachers can increase student motivation and improve academic achievement.

Gender is another basis of diversity in the classroom (Heacox, 2012). Brain research shows that gender may influence the patterns of students learning. For example, male students involve themselves in regular physical activity and do best with hands-on learning. On the other hand, female students prefer to learn more with activities such as verbal-linguistic. They also seem inquisitive and ask questions and discuss ideas and concepts. Above and beyond, female learners have a preference for real-life applications and examples, and a balance between independent and collaborative work (Gurian & Stevens, 2010). Consequently, instructors need to use different teaching strategies in order to meet the requirements and likings of diverse students.

Data Collection & Methodology:

This research study was conducted among the college students of the English department in February 2022 with the purpose of understanding Learners' Diversity in EFL Classrooms in Online Classes. The main purpose of conducting this research study was to investigate the current practice of online forums for English as a Foreign Language at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Though the university has been encouraging the use of online forums to promote better interaction among students in English. The study also attempts to explore the types of online interactions, language usage, and other related topics. The papers will also provide some suggestions for creating differentiated classrooms to enhance English language usage among University students.

The data was collected through the interviews of four diverse focused groups was used to gather data for the study. The groups were divided on the basis of ethnicity, Gender, Cognitive abilities, and Social Status. The interviews were conducted by the fishbowl method. During the interview, 10 questions were asked to find out about the learning of EFL

and the kinds of activities students were engaged in online, comprehension levels through a virtual platform. A total of 32 respondents from the Department of English Language Studies and Linguistics participated in this study.

32 students were approached for the interview to collect the accurate results on the learners' diversity in EFL classrooms. These interviews involved 10 one-on-one conversations with students. The one-on-one interviews consisted of ten open-ended questions, which were aimed to answer, and determine, how social media interaction influences, positively or negatively, an individual's attitude, attention, interests, and social/personal activities. The largest motive behind the questions was to determine how individual communication skills, have changed from interacting via various social media platforms. The interviews were recorded through mobile phones. Each one was given an average time between five to fifteen minutes.

Findings & Analysis of the Study:

The data shows that different learners have different opinions about learning EFL during online classes. This raises the possibility of having in person communication, especially learning English as a foreign language. rather than learning it through online classes. How do you find online classes as compared to offline classes, especially learning English as a foreign language?

Participant 1. "Yes! I believe, online resources and mobile supported apps can be helpful to a great extent, learning EFL."

Participant 2. "In my opinion, physical classes are more effective than online classrooms as I can pay more attention in real classrooms and therefore retain more information and recall it for a longer period of time."

Participant 3. "Yes! Our teachers incorporate different teaching pedagogies to include diverse students like role plays, enacting plays, poetry recitation, storytelling, and translation from their regional language into English, etc."

Participant 4. "It is necessary to have an instructor if one wishes to learn English as a foreign language."

Participant 5. "Yes! Teacher makes EFL easy to understand by using diverse pedagogies as per the requirements of the student's diversity."

Participant 6. Yes! I feel EFL should only be taught by a native English-speaking teacher to have a better command of the language.

Participant 7. Yes! I feel the diversity of learners poses a challenge in understanding EFL in online classes due to the constraint of time and lack of group assignments.

Participant 8. Yes! I feel diversity in physical classrooms facilitates a better understanding of learning EFL due to the constraint of group activities and real-time problem-solving understanding of the language.

Participant 9. No! I feel the contact hours allotted to learning EFL in online classes are not sufficient and due to which the individualistic requirements are not met in the classroom.

Participant 10. Yes! I and my teacher make positive efforts to learn EFL during online classes but sometimes do not end up fulfilling each other's expectations.

The findings revealed that there is a diversity in learning English as a foreign language during online classes. Because of the diversity, it posed a challenge having a better understanding EFL. Students belonging from diverse background felt exclusive because of the lack of physical presence of the instructor. The results indicated that surveyed individuals

chiefly addressed diverse challenges faced by students learning English as a foreign language. As a result, EFL teachers must employ a variety of teaching methodologies in order to provide their students with rigorous, relevant, complex, varied, and flexible instruction that benefits all types of learners.

Suggestions & Recommendations

As mentioned beforehand, understanding the sources of diversity is the first step to creating supportive and inclusive classrooms. Then, with this information, instructors will be in a position to make responsible decisions about the curriculum, instruction, and environment they need to create to provide to their diverse students. As a result, this section will go through specific tactics that teachers can utilize to build inclusive and supportive learning environments for their different students. Regardless of the fact that such practices are categorized based on the source of variety.

Diversity of Cognitive Abilities

To cater to the needs of diverse students in the classrooms, a practical strategy is to implement 'Multiple Intelligences' across the curriculum in order to allow the students to show their understanding and abilities in diverse ways (Finnegan, 2012; Freeman, Freeman & Ramirez, 2008). Furthermore, different instructional strategies should be used, lessons should be developed around students' interests and needs, personalized instruction and materials should be used, content should be taught in small sequential steps, and study materials and peer tutors should be provided for those learners who require extra support.

When dealing with slow learners, teachers should help them create their own timelines for achieving their goals. Teachers can further distinguish assignments by adjusting the length, difficulty level, and time duration.

On the other hand, if teachers have talented learners in the classroom, it is important to promote their creativity and critical thinking skills to solve problems (Freeman, Freeman & Ramirez, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011). Even though they are talented, they do not possess all the brain powers. That is why educators have to help them to improve their weaker areas. It is critical to apply a fair and relevant curriculum with these pupils, as well as to consider differentiated tasks. It is critical to choose instructional content that is relevant and, at times, engaging for the student. Furthermore, instructors must eliminate unnecessary tasks and minimise repetitive activities if pupils have previously mastered specific topic or skills. Finally, it is critical to give inspiring resources in order to keep students engaged in class (Burden, 2010; Kanevsky, 2011). Teachers will address students' talents and interests in this manner, inspiring them to continue learning.

Diversity of Learning Styles

Teachers should get the use "Interest Inventories" (originally developed by the psychologist Edward Kellog Strong in 1927) filled by the students to know about their interests, likings, preferable learning styles, etc. Questionnaires used to collect information on students' interests and learning characteristics are known as interest inventories (Heacox, 2012). Then, instructors can give them the opportunity to try different types of activities and materials that they consider stimulating and motivating as per their own interests.

Colleges must remap the Curriculum materials which must reflect the diversity of learners in the classroom (Burden, 2010). For example, it is possible to use not only textbooks, but also visuals and other activities such as collages, posters, flipped classrooms, role-plays, real-life objects, pictures, and games. Teachers should mix lectures with learning centers, projects, and group activities in the classroom. In general, it is fundamental to adapt instruction and assessment to how students learn and to how students exhibit what they have learned. For left-brain dominant students, it is essential to sequence the learning process and develops skills required for information processing, in the class. Right-brain dominant students should practice intuitive thinking and utilize visual-spatial materials. Finally, teachers can use independent reading, companion reading, decoding texts with images, online research, group demonstration, small group instruction, and individual work to familiarize the class with the needs of students (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

Diversity of Cultural Backgrounds

In order to create differentiated classrooms, instructors need to get to know their students in-depth. Home visits and parent interviews can be highly useful tools for instructors to use in order to get to know their students and their families

better (Gurung & Prieto, 2009). Bio-data questionnaires can also be used to learn about the learners' native language and family history (Johns & Sipp, 2004; Wang, 2007).

All the information gathered through home visits through parent interviews can direct teachers to use culturally significant teaching pedagogies and to incorporate learning experiences that go across cultures (Holmes, Rutledge & Gauthier, 2009; Wang, 2007). This means that teachers incorporate students' cultural diversity into the curriculum. For instance, teachers can use visuals and works of art that represent the students' cultures. Movies and documentary clips that give students the opportunity to explore their own cultures, geographical regions, and history can also be used for this particular purpose (Holmes, Rutledge & Gauthier, 2009).

Instructors can even introduce global education content and materials into lessons, include the analysis of other cultures in the curriculum, and select class routines that do not affect any cultural value. Overall, teachers need to create learning experiences that are pertinent and significant across cultures. (Wang, 2007).

Diversity of Socioeconomic Status

When there are low-income minority students in the classroom, it is important for the teacher to empower the students, and not just have sympathy (Fehr & Agnello, 2012; Flaherty & Hackler, 2010). The teacher must make sure that These students should have access to an open and fair, independent, and creative work educational environment. Such students have equal rights to have individualized attention from teachers. They should have the opportunity to develop skills to become independent workforce l and decision-makers, which are important qualities needed to easily move into high working positions (Bowles, 1972). Through differentiated learners have the opportunity to develop their own knowledge and abilities. This kind of differentiated instruction in the classroom will help them to get an equal place in society.

Gender Diversity

Literature and research confirm that if teachers want to make the classroom more gender-friendly for all students, it is important to make learning visual, give students choices, provide equal opportunities for social interaction, and class activities, find ways to make learning real, include art and music into the curriculum, and encourage for equal participation (Gurian & Stevens, 2010; Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2003). Despite the preferences and differences, all students, no matter the gender, can grow and flourish in any area if they strive to achieve their goals (Burden, 2010).

Conclusion

Learners' Diversity in EFL Classrooms as evidenced by the literature review and the study conducted, take many forms in educational settings and can create discouraging challenges for students, and also educators, especially during online platforms. The types of diversity discussed in this paper illuminated some important cases when teaching EFL happens through online classes.

Diversity in education and particularly in EFL instruction needs to be continually studied with particular emphasis on adopting inclusive communicative language learning approaches which utilize the social components of learning by adopting meaningful collaborative and differentiated classroom interaction between students and their peer groups.

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