

Mixed-Ability Classrooms: A Look into a Typical Indian ESL Undergraduate Classroom



Chattaraj, Dishari

PhD Research Scholar, Centre for Linguistics, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies, JNU, New Delhi, India

E-mail : disharij@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The present study, which is based on 50 first year undergraduate students, aims to study the diversity that exists in a typical Indian ESL Undergraduate classroom. And, in doing so it studies the variation in learners' perceptions, their attitude towards English Language Learning and the program they are studying, their language learning strategies, and their perception of errors. The study also tests the performance of the students by means of a LAT and Free Composition test. It applies certain statistical tools and also uses Error Analysis as a tool to decipher the level of the students. The study ends by providing pedagogical implications of the findings.

Keywords: *Mixed-Ability Classroom, English as Second Language (ESL), English Language Teaching (ELT), Error Analysis (EA).*

1. Introduction

Jones (2007) in the book *Student-centered Classroom* notes "In many ways, every class is a mixed ability class. Even students who have studied together all the time will have varied mastery of the language or remember different things. Some will be better at different skills: reading, writing, listening or speaking. They bring their own personalities, strengths, weaknesses, and learning style to the class." The situation Jones talks about is, however, much less problematic than the situation faced in countries like India where the undergraduate language classrooms are

distinctly large in terms of the number of students as a result of which the diversity among the students in terms of their linguistic skills, motivation and perceptions are highly varied; also there is limitation of resources as well as time and the teacher-student ratio is quite alarming (Chattaraj, 2015). So, it can be said the English language classrooms are highly diversified and the resources to meet the needs of these mixed-ability classrooms are nil. A much better picture of mixed-ability classroom is painted by Narang et al. (2016:vii) for our Indian context when they define a mixed ability classroom; they put it thus "Mixed Ability classroom refers to the difference in

language level among the students in terms of learning style, students' background knowledge, knowledge of the world, their skills and talents in other areas and finally in the levels of motivation". Though there has been a range of studies stating ways in which the mixed-ability classes can be tackled in Indian Contexts (Shrivastava, 2010; Mirani and Chunawala, 2015), studies dealing with the demography of an in-house English classroom-diversity are rare.

The present study deals with Bengali speakers learning English as Second Language (SL) in the undergraduate courses in Calcutta University. The participants of this study are 50 odd first-year students. These students were part of a larger class which comprised of nearly a 100 students. These students belonged to History, Economics, and Hindi honors (major) courses and they were clubbed together and taught a literature centric syllabus for their 'Compulsory English' course. Also, among these 50 students, 22 belonged to English medium backgrounds and 28 to Bengali medium backgrounds. The description of the students itself unravels the diversity that can be located in them.

2. Literature Review

Mixed-ability class is one of the major challenges faced by the Indian English teacher. Kundu (2014) wonderfully describes the concept of mixed ability classes in the Indian scenario. She presents a hypothetical picture of a class XII classroom consisting of 100 students and says that only 10% of the students have the

desired proficiency and in the rest of the 90%, 15% are of class VI standard, 20% are of class XI standard, 10% of class VII, 12% of class VIII, 10% of class IX and a few of them are above XII standard as a result of which a teacher teaches students from classes VI-XIV in the same class.

Shrivastava (2010) very briefly discusses the causes that lead to the diversity in Indian classrooms. After sparing a line each on cultural differences and personality traits which might be influenced by the place of residence or the schooling of the learners, she goes on to give some very general recommendations for overcoming the diversity like caring for the students, group presentations, stimulation and role-play etc. Mirani and Chunawala (2015) conducted a qualitative study to see how the teachers perceive the mixed ability classrooms and what measures they take to deal with it. It is noted that mixed-groups, nominal separation, interaction/activity based practices are found to be the effective ways of handling heterogeneous classes. However, the negative psychological effects of such practices on the relatively weak students are acknowledged by the participant teachers. Shoerey (1999) conducted a study with Indian college students to study the pattern of language learning strategy use among the students. He also conducted interviews with teachers in which he found that the most challenging problem that the teachers face in the classroom is the varied level of English proficiency.

Biber (2006) points out that the transition from school to college is a difficult one for

all the students as they are exposed to complex academic discourse and the lack of 'register' specific language course further puts them into greater trouble. Pandey (2011) also talks about the need for Need-Analysis models to provide the students language inputs matching their needs. However, as Chattaraj (2015) points out, amidst the greater problems of large-classrooms, mixed-background and mixed-ability classrooms, the plight of the learners is often lost.

3. The Present Study

The present study is a cross-sectional primary research based on empirical data. The aim of the study is to find out the diversity that exists within an ESL undergraduate classroom. The participants of this study are 50 first-year ESL undergraduate students enrolled in a college affiliated to Calcutta University for History (BA) and Economics (B.Sc) Honors (Major) courses. The students were given a combined 'Compulsory English' course together in one big classroom. Among these 50 students, 22 (10 female and 12 male) had studied in English medium schools and 28 (12 female and 16 male) in Bengali medium schools. The data for this study was elicited through three main components, they are: a) Questionnaire b) LAT and c) Free composition. The questionnaire comprised of 28 questions, the LAT had 16 questions and 24 blanks and in the free-composition test the learners were asked to write an essay of 150-200 on any one of the three topics given. The learners were given one hour to complete the test.

The Journal of English Language Teaching (India) LIX/5, 2017

4. Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

While analyzing the responses and test results of the learners it was found that the medium of instruction in school had a major impact on both the responses and the test results of the learners. As it was not possible to address each of the 50 learners separately, they are divided into two broad groups based on the medium of instruction they had in school and their responses and performances are studied accordingly.

4.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire had 26 questions the responses to which had to be given on a Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Agree* (1) to *Strongly Disagree* (5). The responses to this questionnaire were collected from 95 students for testing the reliability and the questionnaire was subjected to Cronbach's Alpha test. The first part dealing with the attitude of the learners towards speaking and writing in English noted an alpha reading of 0.87. The second section dealing with learners' perception of the current English program has an alpha value of 0.78. The third section dealing with strategies had an alpha reading of 0.5 and last section which deals with learners' perception of errors has an alpha value of 0.85. The responses of the 50 learners who participated in this study are discussed below.

The first section of the questionnaire had five questions about the learners' perception of writing/speaking in English. The T-test result shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the responses made by the two groups ($p < 0.05$). Whereas the learners

from English medium backgrounds are positive about their English writing and speaking skills ($M=2$), the learners from Bengali medium backgrounds are unsure ($M=3.42$) about it. The second section had five questions about learners' perception of the present English program. The T-test result shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the responses made by the two groups ($p < 0.05$). It is noted that none of the students are satisfied with the literature centric program; however, the English medium students had a comparatively positive perception of the program ($M=3$) than the Bengali medium students ($M=3.65$). The third section had eight questions about the language learning strategies applied by the learners. Among these 8 strategies, four were metacognitive and four cognitive strategies. No statistically significant differences are noted in the use of either cognitive or metacognitive strategies among the two groups. However, one noticeable fact in the use of strategies is whereas the Bengali medium students responded positively about the use of translations strategies, the English medium students are extremely negative about the same. The last section dealt with the perception of the students about the errors since the study uses Error Analysis as a tool to find out the differences in the proficiency levels of the students studying in the same class. The T-test result shows that there is a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) with the Bengali medium students having more concern and awareness for the errors they made ($M=2.03$) than the English medium students ($M=3.22$). (See Appendices for tables).

4.2 Language Ability Test (LAT)

A test of any kind is conducted to measure a person's ability, knowledge or performance in a given domain. There were total 24 items to assess the participants' ability to make proper use of prepositions, articles, tenses, voice, direct/indirect sentences, adjectives, and adverbs. The responses to the LAT were collected from 95 students for testing the reliability and the questionnaire was subjected to Cronbach's Alpha test. The alpha reading for the LAT was 0.73. The T-test result shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the scores of both the groups ($p < 0.05$).

The LAT score shows that the English medium students performed much better than their co-learners from Bengali medium backgrounds. Whereas the average percentage of the English medium students is as high as 74.79% (Score 17.95/24), that of the Bengali medium students is only 45.54% (Score 10.93/24). According to the scores, whereas the English medium students can be termed as highly proficient, the Bengali medium students can only be termed as low proficient learners. The Bengali medium male students (11.6/24) performed slightly better than the female students (10/24) whereas, the English medium female students (19.3/24) outperformed the English medium male students (16.83/24).

4.3 Free Composition Test

Nature of Composition: The English medium students wrote on an average 105 words per compositions more than the

Bengali medium students. The learners from English medium background produced as many as 111 error free sentences while the learners from Bengali medium background produced only 17 error free sentences. The English medium students produced on an average 5 more sentences per composition than the Bengali medium students and the former also wrote lengthy and more complex sentences compared to the latter. The English medium students produced 42.13% error free sentences while the Bengali medium students produced only 8.54% error free sentences. Whereas the English medium students produced only 7% errors, the Bengali medium students produced 30.41% errors. Thus the nature of composition, its length, and the error percentages, show that in spite being learners in the same class, there exists a strong dichotomy between these two group of learners. The gender of the students had some impact on the nature of compositions they produced with the male learners of both the groups performing better than the female learners in respect to the number of sentences produced. Though, there is not much of a difference in the number of errors made by the male and female English

medium learners, the Bengali medium male students made more number of errors as compared to their female counterparts.

Distribution of Errors: In the face of the dichotomy that exists between the performances of the two groups of learners the present study is dealing with, it will be interesting to see what the nature of the errors reveal about the learners; whether there is a pattern in the distribution of error categories and whether there is a difference in the distribution. An exhaustive study of the error categories shows that though there is a huge difference in the number of errors being made in the compositions, as discussed in the previous paragraph, there is no difference in the distribution of errors. Both the groups made the maximum number of morpho-syntactic¹ errors followed by spelling and punctuation errors, lexico-semantic² errors and syntactic errors.

Cause of Errors: While analyzing the cause of errors, it is found that the Bengali medium students produced almost three times more number of interlingual³ errors (19.12%) than the English medium students (7.28%). The learners from the English medium backgrounds on the other hand

¹ Morphosyntactic errors: As Pandey (2011) points out, it arises from the erroneous use of morphological inflections and syntactic rules i.e. these are mainly grammatical errors. This category will comprise of a) Erroneous use of plural marking, possessive marking, degree of comparison marking etc. b) Erroneous use of tense marking c) Erroneous use of prepositions d) Errors in use of article e) Erroneous word order.

² Lexico-semantic errors: it arises from inappropriate use of words and can range from use of wrong words (for example advise for advice etc.), collocation errors, translation errors, wrong word forms and duplication errors.

³ Interlingual errors: these are errors which arise as a result of language transfer i.e. transfer of learner's L1(First Language) rules to L2 (Second Language).

made more number of intralingual⁴ errors (89%) than the Bengali medium learners (71%). While interlingual errors are conceived to be errors occurring at elementary levels, intralingual or developmental errors as the name suggests occur at latter stages of learning (Brown, 2000). This points to the fact that the learners from the English medium backgrounds belong to a much higher level of learning as compared to their classmates who are from Bengali medium backgrounds.

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The study was conducted with an aim to unravel the diversity that exists among the perceptions and proficiency of the students in a typical undergraduate English classroom. The study shows that among the range of factors listed in literature leading to the diversity, the medium of instruction in school has the most significant impact on the perceptions and performance of the students. The analysis of the questionnaire shows that the learners coming from English medium backgrounds were much more confident than their fellow learners from Bengali medium backgrounds. The confidence, however, is not just limited to the perceptions but is well reflected in the performance of the English medium students. The LAT score, nature of composition, its length and the error percentages are all indicative of the high level of proficiency of the English medium students.

Evidently, there are two distinct levels of students in the same classroom, one with high proficiency level and the other with low proficiency level. This strong dichotomy leads to what Mukherjee (2009) termed as the formation of alternative hegemonies in the language classrooms. The formation of alternative hegemonies wreaks havoc on the low proficiency students hampering their confidence and motivation.

The various ways of handling a mixed-ability classroom as has been located in literature are designing group tasks, making mixed-groups, using electronic media and using language games. However, with the given composition of the classroom mentioned in this study and the nature of the program i.e. literature-centric program, it will be very difficult to conduct group tasks; and if there are no group tasks then there is no scope of creating mixed-ability groups. It is very difficult to suggest the ways of handling a class as diverse as this. If the focus is on the low proficiency students, the high proficiency students will not learn anything out of the course and vice-versa. There are only two ways of resolving this problem; either the low proficiency learners should be given special English classes to enhance their proficiency or the students should be taught in two separate classrooms based on their proficiency levels. This might not be an ideal way of dealing with mixed-ability classes, however, in face of such

⁴ Intralingual errors: also known as developmental errors. These errors occur once the learners begin to acquire parts of the new system. These errors occur when the learners form hypothesis based on their partial exposure to the Target Language. These errors correspond neither to the Mother Tongue nor to the Target Language.

magnanimity in terms of the strength of the proficiency, it's hard to suggest any other class and diversity in terms of the probable solution.

Appendix I

Perceptions about writing/speaking in English	Bengali Medium	English medium
Writing in English is an easy task.	3.10	1.77
Speaking in English is an easy task.	3.21	1.86
I always find English writing classes to be interesting.	3.46	2.4
I always find English speaking classes to be interesting.	3.57	2.22
I find it easy to express my thoughts and ideas in writing in English.	3.78	1.77
Average	3.42	2

Appendix II

Perceptions about the current English programme	Bengali Medium	English medium
The English programme offered to me is very useful.	3.5	2.63
The English programme encourages me to use English creatively.	3.57	2.5
The programme mainly focuses on writing skills.	3.4	2.9
The programme mainly focuses on oral skills.	3.5	3.09
Audio-visual aids are used in the class.	4.25	3.86
Average	3.65	3

Appendix III

Language Learning Strategy Use	Bengali Medium	English medium
I always make a plan before I start writing.	1.8	1.86
Whenever I write in English, I take notes in Bengali and translate it into English.	1.64	4.54
I seek help when I write a composition in English.	2.8	3.90
I re-read what I have written to get ideas about how to continue.	2.17	1.63
When I have written my paper I hand it after revising it.	2.28	2.13
I sometimes translate what I have written in my mind in Bangla to make sure I written all the points.	1.96	4
I believe that my written English skills are better than my spoken English skills.	2.82	2.54
I always use a dictionary.	3.89	2.13
Average	2.42	2.84

Appendix IV

Perception about errors	Bengali Medium	English medium
When speaking/ writing in English I am worried about the errors I make	1.57	2.36
My errors in writing are mostly in grammar.	1.64	2.81
My errors in writing are mostly in the appropriate use of vocabulary (words) in the context.	2.10	2.95
My errors in writing are mostly in spelling and punctuation.	2.21	3.59
My errors in speaking are mostly in grammar.	1.92	3.63
My errors in speaking are mostly in the appropriate use of vocabulary (words) in context.	1.27	2.95
My errors in speaking are mostly in pronunciation.	2.42	4.13
My errors in speaking are mostly in fluency and intonation.	2.21	3.36
Average	2.03	3.22

References

- Biber, D. (2006). *University language: A corpus-based study of spoken and written registers* (Vol. 23). John Benjamins Publishing.
- Chattaraj, Dishari (2015). The challenges of teaching and learning Compulsory English at the undergraduate level: A Case of Calcutta University. *The Global Journal of English Studies September 2015* Vol. 1.2 ISSN: 2395 4795.
- Jones, Leo (2007). *The student-centered classroom*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Kundu, Manmatha (2014). Managing Differently-Proficient Learners and Mixed-Ability Classes: The First Priority in Making an English Class Inclusive in Our Country. *Making The English Classroom in India More Inclusive* Vol. 3.1.
- Mirani, Smruti, and Sugra Chunawala. Teachers' Perceptions of Dealing with Mixed Ability Classrooms. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sugra_Chunawala/publication/292513387_Teachers'_Perceptions_of_Dealing_with_Mixed_Ability_Classrooms_links/56b2e62408aed7ba3fedf011/Teachers-Perceptions-of-Dealing-with-Mixed-Ability-Classrooms.pdf (8 Aug, 2017).
- Mukherjee, Alok (2009). *This gift of English: English education and the formation of alternative hegemonies in India*. Orient Blackswan.
- Narang, Vaishna, Salonee Priya, and Varalakshmi Chaudhry (2016). *Second Language Acquisition in Multilingual and Mixed Ability Indian Classrooms*. Springer India.
- Pandey, G.P (2011). *Learner-centred approach to ELT for BBS: A study in ESP-ESBP for Nepalese undergraduates*. Diss. JawaharlalNehruUniversity.
- Sheorey, Ravi (1999). An examination of language learning strategy use in the setting of an indigenized variety of English. *System* Vol. 27.2.
- Shrivastava, Archana, and J. Sundarsingh (2010). Coping with the Problems of Mixed Ability Students. *Language in India* Vol. 10.1.