CONSIDERABLE STRATEGIES OF TEACHING LARGE MULTI-LEVELCLASSES: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF WHAT EFL TEACHERS SHOULD DO

Salwa
wawa.live@yahoo.co.id

Abstract: Teaching classes in which there is a uniformity of learners' proficiency level is the most ideal environment in language classes since it enables teachers to apply appropriate teaching and learning strategies based on the individual student's level. However, in EFL settings, most teachers especially in school environments have to teach classes in which the learners have multiple levels of ability, since at schools, there is no placement test on students' ability of English as is usually done in private language institutions or courses. This paper provides some useful strategies which can be applied by teachers in teaching classes where true and false beginners are within the same class so that by applying these strategies, it is hoped that weaker students may get benefit from interacting with stronger students without holding back the strong ones.

Key words:*Teaching strategies, large, multi-level classes, EFL teachers*

Teaching English in the EFL context needs more efforts and persistence since the target language (TL) is not used in the daily conversation and also the phenomena that in the EFL contexts, most of the classes are large and mixed ability in which EFL teachers often find both true and false beginners in a classroom.

According to Brown (2007) true beginners are students who do not have any knowledge of the target language, whereas false beginners are those who have previously studied the target language (for example, they have been familiar with alphabets; simple greetings), but they remember only a little of what they have learned.

Due to the characteristics of beginners who still have a high dependency on their teachers as a role model, the most suitable approach to be applied in this kind of class is the teacher-centered classroom (Brown, 2007). Therefore, in this novice stage, teachers play a significant role in helping the lower level students to improve their language skills. Since there are two levels of beginners in this kind of class, a good language teacher should apply some special techniques to successfully teach this mixed-ability class as teaching this kind of class needs more preparation and special techniques than teaching in placed or streamed classes.I am going to provide some strategies which can be applied in teaching true and false beginners within a class.

TASK DIFFERENCIATION STRATEGY

Firstly, teachers can use different tasks for individual students based on their levels. Harmer (2007) argues that giving students a different content is the

best way to know individual needs. However, teachers should first give clear instruction about the topic that is going to be discussed. For example if teachers plan to teach the tense form "future tense', teachers might give the true beginners a more simple task, for example by asking them to find some examples of the usage of the future form used in passages on magazines, whereas a more difficult task could be given to the stronger ones, such as asking them to create their own sentences using future form. In addition by giving different materials, using inappropriate tasks could be avoided, since if the task is too difficult, it may cause the true beginners to feel frustrated and de-motivated, whereas if they are too easy, they will cause the false beginner ones to feel unchallenged.

However, some people have argued that this preparation is time consuming since teachers need to make special preparation (Quynh, 2007), in addition, Hamdan (2011) states that in Indonesia, Minister of Education has already chosen the text-book based materials, so teachers should use those books as the main teaching aid. Nevertheless, nowadays, there is a significant increase in the use of authentic materials since they play beneficial role in increasing students' motivation and achievement as well. Peacock (1997) argues that authentic materials are more motivating than constructed materials, even for the beginner level students.

So, in providing the flexible tasks, teachers should use multiple texts-reading materials which have different linguistic levels to suit learners' ability.. Moreover, nowadays, there are various computer programs which offer both simple and complicated activities that both high and low level students can work with. My experience in applying this strategy was that I gave my student a gap-filling task. To students whom I considered as false beginners, I gave them more complicated lexical items, such as filling the noun clause or difficult vocabulary. Conversely, for the true beginner ones, I asked them to use simpler vocabulary or structure, for example modals or verbs etc. This technique is beneficial and easy to use not only in terms of administering, but also in giving feedback.

The task below is an example of task differentiations activities. A tiered task adapted from Bowler and Parminter (2002, p. 60 – 61 in Pavlov, 2011) from a passage on the spirit of London exhibit at Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London.

Madame Tussaud's London
Spirit of London Taxi Ride

Hop into one of London's infamous black cabs and take a journey through the capital's history. From the comfort of your taxi, witness the historical and cultural events that have shaped London into one of the greatest cities in the world.

First, travel through Tudor London, to the sound of pipes and minstrels before moving into a darker age, where London's streets are haunted by the plague! In the distance flames are spreading from the King's bakery, it's the Great Fire of London! Burning mile after mile, the plague dies in the flames.

Then, hear the masons work around you on the infamous St Paul's Cathedral, before immersing yourself in the heart of a massive empire. Queen Victoria sits on her throne, with the wheels of a revolutionary industry turning behind her. Another London character comes into view, it's Nelson on his column! Come face-to-face with this life-size recreation of the famous statue!

Next, the city is at war and the bombs of the Blitz rain down. All is not lost, however, as you roll into the bright lights of the 1960s where mini-skirted figures dance around a zebra crossing against a psychedelic backdrop!

Finally, move into the 1980s and beyond... the sights, the sounds, the colours, and the joy of The Spirit of London!

(for weaker students : fully supported)

---

1. How much of London's history does theSpirit of London show?
2. How do you go around it ?
3. What special effects does it have
4. What can you see in the modern-day section?

ANSWERS
   a. light, sound, music, smells
   b. Police, punks, and tourists
   c. More than 400 years
   d. In a taxi

MIDDLE TIER
TASK B
(for midlevel students: partially supported)
 1. How much of London's history does the Spirit of London show?
      a. 400 years
      b. more than 400 years
      c. 399 years
 2. How do you go around it ?
      a. in a taxi
      b. in a train
      c. on foot
 3. What special effects does it have?
      a. lights
      b. sound and music
      c. smells
 4. What can you see in the modern-day section?
      a. police
      b. punks
      c .tourists

BOTTOM TIER
TASK C
(for stronger students : unsupported)
   1. How much of London's history does 'The Spirit of London" show?
   2. How do you go around it?
   3. What special effects does it have?
   4. What can you see in the modern-day section?

This kind of tasks are useful for students at all linguistic levels, the true beginners may give short answers whereas the high level ones may provide more detailed answers as a way to practice their syntactic knowledge. Therefore, differentiating tasks is considered as an effective strategy for EFL teachers dealing with increasingly diverse classrooms.

Another technique that could be used in mixed ability classes is to give more open-ended tasks since it is considered to be the best way to encourage all students to participate in class. Instead of using multiple-choice tasks which only have a single right answer (yes/no questions), it is better if teachers allow multiple right answers, so that teachers give opportunity for both true and false beginners to perform at their own level. For an example, teachers ask students to respond to a picture. True beginner learners may give short answer while the stronger ones may give extended answers as they have higher syntactic knowledge. According to Prodromou (1995, as cited in Pavlov & Xanthou, 2001) , open ended tasks promote communicative language teaching because both higher and lower students can participate in using the target language in a more meaningful situation.

THE BENEFITS OF HETEROGENEOUS GROUPING

Heterogeneous grouping is another strategy which is considered very useful in a mixed- ability class because by giving them cooperative tasks in a group will enable both true and false beginners to engage with the task. The teacher may give an issue to be discussed within a group and then ask them to make a group presentation. Furthermore, it is beneficial since high level students can give guidance or help to the lower level ones. 'In this classroom environment, advanced level students act as a bridge to facilitate the learning process and lower level classmates exhibit a willingness to cross that bridge.Harmer (2007) also claims that group work can increase students' skills in negotiation and cooperation as well.

However, some argue that homogeneous grouping is more advantageous since it is easier for teachers to give instructions based on the students' ability in the particular group. However, I believe that there are potential drawbacks in applying

homogenous grouping, because students will not improve their ability since they work with the same level students. Furthermore, they are being stigmatized and feel stupid. Matthew (1997, as cited in Pavlov & Xanthou, 2011) claims that ' ability grouping may decrease the self-esteem and aspirations of low-ability children and therefore hold back their academic progress'.

Another prominent strategy that could be applied in teaching true and false beginners within a class is that teachers should prepare contingency plan materials. These could be additional activities/ exercises, for example providing a test of vocabulary which has learned that day, or they could be games/ quizzes, etc. Preparing contingency plan materials is important since the false beginners might be the early finishers, so, although using a contingency plan is not compulsory, it is helpful to fill up the time while waiting for other students to finish their tasks.

In addition, Copur (2005) states that usually students who finish the tasks earlier will get bored and do inappropriate behaviours, because they get bored while waiting the others finishing the tasks. Fortunately, recently, some of textbooks have included contingency plans so that teachers can make use of them.

ACTIVE LEARNING AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY

Based on those discussions above, EFL teachers should apply instructional strategy which promotes active learning instead of direct teaching styles so that they ay promote academic development of students having diverse background ability and knowledge. EFL teachers may use quizzes, language games, and storytelling. The finding of a study conducted by Pavlou (2002) showed that communicative and active learning such as word games, songs, and task

differentiations can increase learners' language performance in the mixed ability class situation.

A myriads of interesting strategies that could be used is to provide fun materials such as games, songs, quizzes, etc. We cannot deny that all learners regardless of what levels they are at enjoying fun materials. As Prodromou (1995, as cited in Xanthou, M., & Pavlov, P, 2011) states that despite the differences in ability showed by mixed ability learners, they are all similar in enjoying pleasure. In addition, those materials, especially games are considered to be the most powerful tool in increasing learners' enthusiasm. Uberman (1998) argues ' A relaxing learning atmosphere is created when games are used in the classroom'.

Another significant strategy which can be applied is that teachers should focus on topics rather than on linguistic skills, because students at beginner level especially the true ones still have simple linguistic skill and do not have a wide range of vocabulary as well. Therefore, it is still difficult for them to apply grammatical rules . The teacher might use simple authentic language of daily life such as greetings, asking for help, etc. Emphasizing on the function of the language in real life, will keep the lower level students motivated in their learning process. Therefore, schema activation by asking about students' experiences or prior knowledge is considered important. For example, before teaching a topic about holidays, teachers may ask the whole class tell about their experience on their holiday. By doing this, all students will feel that they get attention from their teacher, because as we know, the big danger in a mixed-ability classes is if teachers give too much attention to the higher level students, the lower level ones may feel that they are being ignored, On the other hand, if we spend too much time helping the weaker

students, the stronger ones may feel neglected.

The last strategy that could be applied is to promote self- learner autonomy by providing self-access materials. Teachers should give learners a choice since the students have different skills, needs, and interests as well. Recently, some schools have been equipped with self-access centres, So, students can choose the topic or activities that they are interested in, for example by using video, films cassettes. These activities will increase students' motivation to learn, especially in learning a foreign language that needs more effort and persistence. Nunan (1999, p. 193) believes that "The effective language learner is the one who can make effective choices in terms of learning tasks and strategies'".

ASSESSMENTS IN LARGE MULTILEVEL CLASSES

In the large multilevel classes, particularly in the EFL settings, teachers should apply the most appropriate assessment method which suits the learners' characteristics since teaching in such condition of class has more challenges both in the teaching and learning processes and the assessment type.

There are some assessment methods which are considered beneficial to be applied in the large multiabilities EFL classes. Furthermore, according to Brown (2007) in today's classrooms, teachers are more engaged in the creation of their own tests/instruments based on their own classroom contexts. Therefore, nowadays, the assessment method does not depend on paper and pencil single answer tests or only formal types of assessment which focuses only on theright answer, but nowadays, alternative assessment are most welcome, such as allowing students to have open-ended and more creative answers, free-response format, and continuous long-term assessment, such as in the forms of group projects, student portfolios, and open-ended problem solving tasks. Nunan (1999) states that in the contemporary trend assessment, it is not only apply the standardized test as it is widely used in most traditional type of assessment, in the recent time, students have more opportunities to assess their own learning progress.

However, in applying an alternative assessment, EFL teachers should consider the authenticity of the test as one of the language teaching principles (Brown, 2007) since it encourages the use of language in more contextual meanings, so, the use of test is not only as formal assessment in which exercises are specifically designed to measure students' achievement, but teachers should apply the unplanned and incidental responses, such as if teachers compliment the students' work by saying ' you have done a great job', ' excellent'. Those feedbacks may increase learners' self-confidence and motivation in learning English, therefore the alternative assessment more fosters the intrinsic motivation of the students than in the traditional settings which focuses more on the extrinsic motivation

SELF AND PEER ASSESSMENTS

In the contemporary trend assessment, teachers may allow their students to record their own achievement as it has many benefits such as students may identify their own strengths and weaknesses. According to Nunan (1999) by recording their own achievements, students develop skills in both self-assessment and self-evaluation.Treko (2013) adds that such self-assessment can be put into the students' portfolios which is very useful fo students continuous assessment because they are as the evidence of students; language

achievement which has been reached over time. In addition, by applying this kind of assessment, students may learn how to become better language learner by applying the most appropriate strategy and using the strategy to improve their language skills outside the classroom.

Peer assessment is also considered very useful to be applied in the large multilevel classes since the high level students may help the low level ones and teachers may apply a myriads of modelling activities by advanced learners who will give many benefits in helping the low level ones. A study conducted by Xanthou and Pavlov (2011) showed that the low level students have considerable advantages from the peer-feedback and modelling activities by the advanced ones.As Sean (2002, as stated in Xanthou & Pavlov, 2011), "Advanced level students act as a bridge to facilitate the learning process and lower level classmates exhibit a willingness to cross that bridge". Nunan (1999) points out that by encouraging learners to work in groups, it will increase learners' intrapersonal skill and improve their language skills as well.

CONCLUSION

All in all, teaching both true and false beginners within a class is more challenging and exhausting, but, is rewarding and stimulating as well, as it can both increase teachers' skills in managing the class and students' intrapersonal skills as well. Therefore, despite the challenges that mixed-ability teachers face in teaching mixed ability classes, as long as teachers apply the best strategies in teaching, they can overcome the problems, and the most important thing is that teachers should teach enthusiastically and creatively.

REFERENCES

Brown, H.D. (2007). *Teaching by principle: an interactive approach to languagepedagogy* (3 rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.

Copur S.D,. (2005). Coping with the problems of Mixed Ability Classes. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 11(8). Retrieved from http://itesl.org/Techniques/Salli-

Graves, K. (2000). *Designing Language Courses: A guide for teachers.* USA: Heinle

Harmer, J. (2007*). The Practice of English language teaching.* England: Pearson.

Musthafa, B. (2001). Communicative Language Teaching in Indonesia: Issue of Theoritical Assumptions and Challenges in the Classroom Practice. *TEFLIN Journal*, 12(2). pp 1-14.

Nunan, D. (1988). *The Learner-Centered Curriculum*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning*. USA. Heinle.

Quynh, P.P,.(2007). Some strategies for teaching English to multilevel adult ESL learners: : a challenging experience in Australia. *TEFLIN Journal*.9(4). Retrieved from http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/Dec_2007_ppqn.php

Treko, N (2013). The big challenge. Teaching Large Multilevel classes. 2(4). *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary studies*.

Xanthou, M., & Pavlov, P. (2011). *Strategies of accommodating Mixed Ability Classes in EFL setting*. Retrieved from :http://www.infolizer.com/18tm1a7 9a130a1uk/strategies-of-

accomodating-mixed-ability-classes-in-efl-settings.html

About the Author

Salwa, S.Pd., M.Ed completed her Master study at the School of Education, Flinders University of South Australia in December 2011. She teaches at Kanjuruhan University, Malang.