

## MULTI-LEVEL ELT CLASSES – CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

As the consequence of credit training, the classes mixed with the students having passed the University Entrance Exam and the ones sent from mountainous areas without the strict exam have imposed great problems in the non-major ELT practice at Thai Nguyen University. A case study was conducted on a group of 20 freshmen to explore challenges as well as benefits of the ELT situation and to prove the effectiveness of some suggestive strategies.

**Key words:** *mix-ability, multi-level, cooperative learning, ELT, language teaching*

### 1. ELT situation at Thai Nguyen University

Mixed ability is a common issue confronting every class, since there are hardly ever two students with the same language learning ability, language knowledge, culture background, learning style, motivation, and the like [2, 3, 6]. Among the above mentioned is the distinct difference in instructed language knowledge and communicative competence of students in a class which normally gets integral blame for the ineffectiveness of English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in non-English specialized classes at tertiary schools in Vietnam.

English started being taught in secondary schools and universities in Vietnam more than half a century ago but never has the language occupied such a superior status in our education. The innovation (*doi moi*) in the mid-1980s made a great shift in our world cooperation and integration, and English has become a principal communicative medium in all integrative

interactions in politics, economics, education, and other fields of life between Vietnamese and their partners from other countries. For the last two decades, English competence has been set as a required achievement to every graduate. Graduates with good English competency get much more favored job opportunities than the others. However, the sad fact is that in spite of years spent on language learning at secondary school, and nearly one tenth of the class time devoted to ELT (13 out of 130 approximate total credits for 4-year curriculum, and 160 credits for 5-year curriculums), graduates' foreign language proficiency does not really meet the requirement of the labour market, very few of them are able to communicate in the target language. The situation has currently been more serious after the minister's decision according to which graduates must achieve score 450 either in TOEIC or in TOEFL.

Educators have indicated various possible causes to the inefficiency of ELT in tertiary schools, and mixed level is a formidable reason counting for the ELT failure in non-language majored classes. In these classes, students are normally grouped with regard to their ability of the majors they enroll rather than their English proficiency; hence, a class may include a number of highly achieving students having spent years on English learning at secondary schools, some of them may have attained pre-intermediate level, or even higher, and another number of real beginners. The dramatic difference in student language competence actually creates a great deal of impediment to instructors and learners and constitutes an integral part to the inefficiency of the ELT.

The instructional situation in Thai Nguyen University (TNU), where I work, has got much

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more critical. All freshmen, compiling both the competent ones passing the national entrance examination and the mostly unqualified ones sent from remote mountainous areas taking the much easier institutional examination, are mingled in classes and receive the same education. The idea, according to the education managers, is to eliminate the sent students' sense of special treatment and isolation, and to save the school's expense. This has generated severe difficulty to instruction of all subjects, and to the ELT particularly.

With all the failure of suggestion to conduct placement test and limit the number of learners to 20-30, in an attempt to overcome the problem, ELT teachers have been looking for answers to the two fundamental questions: what is the most one-size-fit-all teaching method for multilevel classes? And how should we do to turn the teachers' number-one enemy into helpful teacher assistance in successful lessons? [2:2; 1: 50].

Prompted by the desire to share the burden with my colleagues, I conducted the case study research to clarify the situation, its challenges and benefits, and check the effectiveness of some promising instructing strategies to the experimental group.

## 2. What is a Multi-level Class?

In practical instruction, learners are, by nature, different in language proficiency, language aptitude, in their general attitude toward language as well as to language learning, therefore all classes of more than one learner might be said to be mixed-ability. But the phenomenon turns to be a concern of language educators when it creates a great deal of serious problems for the instruction, and of all the differences, mixed level is the most troublesome issue confronting teachers.

Ur [9:302] used the term *heterogeneity* to refer to these problems in language classes. Another well-known definition applied to such classes is *mixed-ability (MAC)*. Despite Ur's disagreement for its use because of audience's possible misinterpretation, the jargon *mix-ability* was publicly used in discussions on the sort of classes in which learners are different in their observable 'ability to perform the target

language' as well as their 'potential learning ability' [2:01; 5:5]. To be more specific, MAC refers to classes in which:

- ◆ there are clear differences in language proficiency among the students.
- ◆ there are clear differences in learning styles, speed and aptitude among the students.
- ◆ there are differences in learners' background knowledge, world knowledge, skills and talents in other areas due to their sex, age, maturity, interests, etc.
- ◆ there are different levels of motivation in English language learning.

[2, 3, 4, 5, 6]

Beside the above mentioned elements, there are numerous ways in which learners differ from one another in MAC and various factors which are likely to affect the way of instruction in the specific situation. Some differences can be named as: language learning ability, language knowledge, mother tongue, intelligence, culture background, work knowledge, age, gender, attitude to the language learning, learning experience, etc.

In language classes, the wide disparity of proficiency among learners may be one of the factors that draw the most concern of educators. The language competence of learners in the same class may spread extensively from beginning level to intermediate or so. This causes enormous problems to language instruction; teachers who have ever experienced the teaching situation before may also get quite embarrassed and likely feel stuck to find an effective teaching method to meet every learner's level, demand of intended curriculum, their learning pace and so on. Other terms *Mixed Proficiency* or *Mixed Level Classes* are recommended when researchers lay their research focus on the issue.

## 3. The case study research

A case study was conducted with a group of 20 students from the University of Education, the University of Economics and Business Administration, TUE in a pilot teaching course. The participants involved were voluntary, aged 19-20. They were all freshmen, 3 of

accountancy, 4 of business administration, and 13 of maths. The course was taken in the 2nd semester of the 2009-2010 school year. The course lasted for three months, from the middle of August to the middle of November. The experimental course aimed at looking for evidences of the difficulties and advantages of the class type and to prove the research hypothesis that Cooperative Learning method would be radical solution for the mixed level classes.

### 3. Challenges of Multi-level classes

Multi-level situation causes a variety of challenges which threaten to fail all efforts of the teachers in these classes; unsuccessful lessons and students' negative reaction they may see in the lessons merely prove the ineffectiveness of their instructional strategies. The variety of student abilities may bring about numerous problems relating some of the following major issues [2:2,5:5, 6:303].

- **Discipline:** The teacher in MLC may at times find the class out of his/her control. The breakout of class discipline may result from the boredom when the tasks given are either too easy to some highly achieved students or challenging to the weak ones. Hence, mixed level issue gives teachers the reasonable explanation for the disruption of some weak learners or quick finishers during or at the end of the activities.

- **Lack of Interest:** Teachers sometimes say that they can't find topics and activities that 'serve all tastes of learners' and keep them all interested.

- **Effective learning for all:** Homogeneous tasks provided are either too difficult or too easy for many of them. At times, the stronger may get bored if the teacher spends time explaining to the weaker ones; or the less able in reverse may feel witless if teacher give answers to the better students' questions on issues far beyond their level simply because they can hardly understand them.

- **Materials:** Teachers can not find suitable material; the textbooks are 'homogeneous' – rigidly aimed at only one kind of learner. School compulsory syllabus may be to some extent quite challenging to some students, but quite easy to some others.

- **Individual awareness:** The large class size and enormous differences among students make it really hard for teachers to follow student individual progress. Besides, students are not accustomed to self-regulation and lack self-access skills to individualize the tasks set for the whole class.

- **Uneven Participation:** Many teachers say that it is impossible to activate them all; only a few students – normally the more proficient and confident ones – seem to be reflective in class activities; other students are reluctant and sit still. This problem becomes more serious when teachers conduct student self-regulated activities (eg.: group work, pair work), finding the strong domination of competent learners over the tasks.

- **Pace:** Half of the students have finished an exercise when the other half have only just begun.

- **1<sup>st</sup> Language (L1) use:** The weaker students are always asking things in their mother tongue and want everything explained in it. They are not willing to use L2 (2<sup>nd</sup> language) when the teacher is not with them during their group work.

- **Unsuccessful group work organization:** When doing pair or group work, teachers get embarrassed to make the decision of whether it is better to use mixed level groups or homogeneous ones.

#### I.1.3. Benefits of Multilevel classes

Mixed-ability classes are not only characterized with the difficulties but they may have some advantages that aid teaching.

- **A variety of human resources:** Students of different abilities bring with them various world knowledge, values, their own perspectives on life-relating issues, and different living experiences to the language class. This wealth of dissimilarity can be used to our advantage in creating varied, meaningful, student-centred lessons. Students can learn as much through personal contact as an interactive task in language classes to find out about one another.

- **The teacher is not the only pedagogue:** Since there are different levels of language ability, it is obviously natural to see the more able students quickly assuming the role of teacher-assistants. Very importantly, to exploit this strong point of MAC, teachers should establish the cooperative

and accommodating climate that encourages students to help one another or ask for help from fellow students. In such classes, students can learn as much from their classmates as from the teacher.

- *We are never bored* since the multilevel teaching situation requires our good preparation of simultaneous activities and conduct as well as a variety of stimuli. Going along student exchanges at different levels during student-regulated activities keeps us always exciting and fresh to respond to their talk occasionally.

**-Professional development occurs naturally:** Although teaching in these classes can be much more challenging, it provides ELT teachers with greater motivation and room for creativity, innovation in didactical techniques and material development. To our professional development, these are ‘classes that make us think, create, and grow as teachers’ [3:4].

The question is how to make use of the good points into practical teaching to deal with the difficulties in mixed-level non-major classes. I hereby recommend some techniques, which were applied and prove to be effective in the pilot class, to teachers and learners in the mix-level situation.

## 5. Recommendations for teachers

### 5.1. General recommendations

- **Materials:** To deal with the disparity of the learners’ proficiency, the teacher is advised to design either tiered tasks for different level students or promoting their individualization and personalization.

- **Grouping:** the teacher should vary the grouping in the way of grouping and procedure of the group work. The teacher should think of the way to assign roles and tasks in group, with the consideration of members’ competence.

- **Classroom arrangement:** To facilitate cooperative learning activities, group members should be arranged close to and facing others so that every member can see the sharing materials well and easily exchange materials and ideas. There should be passages among groups for the teacher and class members’ movements when necessary.

- **Being aware of when and how much to use L1 in low language level classes:** equip students with necessary expressions for discussions in groups (e.g: expressions of agreement, refusing, and so on) or expressions for use when they need help.

- **Creating an open cooperative atmosphere in class.** In a safe supportive space makes the learners, particularly the weaker ones, more comfortable to show their feelings and thinking. They also have more courage to take risks of making mistakes when learning and practicing the language in small groups among close friends.

Apart from good preparation and conduct of Cooperative Learning (CL) activities, only if there is learners’ autonomy, good self-awareness of their own learning and active participation in class activities can lessons in CL approach get the most effectiveness.

### 5.2. Some activities for use in multilevel classes

- **Information-gap activities:** Information sharing is one of the most typical types of CL activities, it helps to promote individualization of students’ learning and develop their skills of using the language and other social skills in cooperative tasks. The activities could be conducted in various models: jigsaw reading and listening, half empty chart, etc.

- **Opening-circle Discussion:** Students work in small group, do tasks or discuss certain topics, then the teacher makes a change with group arrangement to give them chance to exchange their group ideas with members from (an)other group(s). Various rearrangements can be done: three stay – one stray, three stray – one stay, pyramid grouping.

- **Content-focusing activities:** In mix level classes, the fact that a learner has not been successful in language learning does not mean s/he lacks general world knowledge, interest and skills of other fields. By providing students with opportunities to make use of this other knowledge in language classes, we can encourage a sense of self esteem and respect, and create bonds among learners of different levels. While students, especially the low ones,

are ‘showing off’ and sharing their knowledge, they try their best to give ideas in the target language, and their language skills are improved subconsciously. Some activities can be: brainstorming, responding to a picture, quizzes, games (drawing and guessing, bee hive, snake and ladder, math tricks, logic puzzles, number puzzles.

- **Activities with different responses:** it allows students to do what they are good at and thereby raise self esteem. All of these activities involve students in making language products (either in writing or speaking form) basically in group work. Some examples of activities with different responses are: project work, role plays, drama.

- **Peer correction:** In mixed level classes, especially the large sized ones, better students are the potential teacher’s assistants to edit the huge amount of written work of the students. In one-to-one peer editing tasks, students are ‘watchful supervisors’. In this way they learn a lot from the partner’s expressions, and avoid the partner’s mistakes in their next writing.

In summary, mix-level is a great issue constraining ELT from success. With some ideas of the mix-level ELT situation and recommendations of some helpful techniques and activities, it is the researcher’s hope to share the burden with the teachers throughout Vietnam and the ELT teachers at her university in particular to deal with the complicated situation of the mixed ability classes.

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#### TÓM TẮT

#### LỚP HỌC TIẾNG ANH ĐA TRÌNH ĐỘ - THÁCH THỨC VÀ GIẢI PHÁP

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Khoa Ngoại ngữ - ĐH Thái Nguyên

Là kết quả của hình thức đào tạo theo học chế tín chỉ, những lớp học pha trộn cả sinh viên chính quy và sinh viên cử tuyển miền núi đã làm nảy sinh nhiều vấn đề cản trở việc dạy và học tiếng Anh ở trường Đại học Thái Nguyên. Một nghiên cứu thử nghiệm đã được tiến hành với 1 nhóm 20 sinh viên năm thứ nhất nhằm phát hiện những thách thức cũng như thuận lợi, kiểm chứng hiệu quả của 1 số kỹ thuật giảng dạy đối với lớp học đặc thù này.

**Từ khóa:** Khả năng kết hợp, đa cấp độ, phối hợp học tập, giảng dạy tiếng Anh, ngôn ngữ giảng dạy

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