

2016-04-30

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TEACHING WRITING SKILL EFFECTIVELY IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES: AN INVESTIGATION OF TERTIARY LEVEL STUDENTS

Sharmin Siddique*

Abstract: Mixed ability class is an important fact of all language classes, no matter where do teachers live in the world or which educational institute they teach. In a mixed ability language class, most of the language teachers often face the challenges of having wide range of language proficiency levels of the students. Not only the teachers, but also the students feel frustrated and demotivated in a mixed ability class. This paper is an endeavor to identify some problems of teaching writing skill in mixed ability classes at tertiary level in private universities in Bangladesh. This study aims at finding out the advantages of mixed ability classes. This paper tries to find out the teaching strategies applicable for mixed ability writing classes. Finally some recommendations have been suggested for the mixed ability writing classes.

1. Introduction

Mixed ability classrooms are one of the big challenges that most of the English language teachers face today. Due to diverse educational backgrounds, life experiences, learning styles, cultural backgrounds, confidence and motivation, English language abilities, attitude towards English of the students, a language class can never be homogenous as two learners can never be similar. The learners may have different levels or different speeds of language learning. However, most language textbooks are designed for ideal homogeneous classroom environment. As a result, in a mixed ability language class, most of the language teachers are often faced with the challenges of having wide range of language proficiency levels. Thus, the aims and objectives of English language course may not be fulfilled and the students may feel demotivated and may not like the English classes. This results into frustration both for the teachers and the students.

The research intends to identify the challenges in a mixed ability classroom at the tertiary level. This article tries to focus on the advantages of a mixed ability class. Another aim of the paper is to identify some strategies to apply in a mixed ability writing class to make it more effective. Finally, some effective recommendations have been suggested that can be applied to a mixed ability class.

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2. Background of the Study

In Bangladesh English is taught as a foreign language from primary to tertiary level. Still most of the students at tertiary level are very weak in four communicative language skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening). The reason behind this weakness is that they come from Bengali medium background, and they are surrounded by Bengali speaking friends and family members. Besides, in our country knowing English language is considered as a matter of prestige and status. Therefore, most of the students are frightened to let their weakness in English language competence be focused in front of the people. (Siddique and Rahman, 2014: p. 178) In addition, Bashir and Ferdousy (2006) in their survey found that in the universities of Bangladesh most of the English language classes contain 15 to 91 students whether these are private or public, and 60% language teachers affirmed these classes are large. Therefore, naturally these large classes contain students of wide range of language proficiency levels. As a result, both the teachers and the students face challenges in a mixed ability writing class continuously. For this reason, the present study has been undertaken which will help teachers to understand the problems in a mixed ability language writing class better, and help them to overcome the challenges. The researcher has selected private universities because in most of the private universities the medium of learning is English.

3. Purpose of the study

The research intends to identify the challenges in a mixed ability classroom at tertiary level. This paper also tries to focus on the advantages of a mixed ability class. The aim of the paper is also to identify some strategies in a mixed ability writing class. Finally, some recommendations have been suggested that can be applied in a mixed ability class.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Advantages of a Mixed Ability Class

Although a mixed ability class encounters many challenges, it ensures some benefits as well. But to achieve the benefits the teachers have to use the multilevel students as positive asset. According to Ur (2003), Harmer (1998) and many more researchers, a mixed ability class ensures the following advantages:

1. Different teaching styles are opened up
2. Less negative labeling of students
3. Teachers can contact with a wide range of students

4. A sense of community can be developed in the school
5. There is a scope of wide social mix and interaction in the classrooms
6. Students' self-esteem and motivation are promoted
7. Teachers can develop new teaching skills
8. Competition is replaced by co-operation

4.2. Challenges in a Mixed Ability Classroom

Most of the mixed ability classes contain students of different abilities. But the objective of the teacher is to reach all the students. If the teacher wants to confirm all students their maximum potential, the teacher has to identify the challenges and deal with them accordingly. The following factors act as challenges in a mixed ability class:

In a mixed ability class, some students may find the materials tedious and difficult, whereas some others find it enjoyable and simple. Thus, the instructor needs increased resources and careful use of resources. Besides, it is necessary for the teacher to evaluate and adapt the materials according to the class.

According to Copur (2005: p. 2) the interest of the students differ due to the differences of their attitude to the subject matter or to the instructor, their prior knowledge of language, and their personality. The unfamiliarity of the topic hampers the interest of the students. According to Ur (2003: p. 303) because of the lack of the interests the students get bored. Sometimes, the teachers do not find suitable topics and activities to keep all students interested.

In a mixed ability class, less responsive students find it difficult to use the target language because of the lack of interest, confidence, and knowledge. The weaker students have the probability to get distracted in a mixed ability classroom atmosphere (Kelly, 1978). It is not possible for the instructor to activate all the students. Only a few more proficient and confident students seem to respond actively to the questions of the teacher (Ur, 2003: p. 303). The stronger students like to express everything they think or feel using the target language.

Planning lesson and collecting work materials are time consuming for the teachers. Often the planned material seems to be too easy or too difficult for the students of wide range of language proficiency level which make the teachers unable to cope with the class. Thus, in a multilevel class teachers feel out of control. It is also difficult to provide individual learning style and make the quiet students active (Hess, 2001: p. 4-6). Balancing individual, group, and whole class teaching, managing the class and checking the classwork or homework of each and every student are also challenging for the teachers. In a multilevel class, only

one method is not suitable for all learners; on the other hand, it is also challenging for the teachers to provide different techniques according to the individual need of the learner.

A mixed ability class is difficult to control. The stronger students finish the given tasks before the weaker students and misbehave with the weaker students while waiting. On the other hand, weaker students cannot finish their tasks quickly and lose their confidence and express ill-disciplined behavior. The stronger students comprehend the lectures fast and the weaker students take time to understand the lectures delivered by the student which makes a chaos in the class.

4.3. Effective Teaching Strategies in a Mixed Ability Class

In a mixed ability class, not only the stronger students feel held back and weaker students pressurized, but also the teachers feel stressed. As a result, naturally a teacher has to apply different strategies to adjust the lesson plans to fit the learning needs of all the individual students. There are several aspects a teacher needs to think about when dealing with a mixed ability class.

In a mixed ability class it is important to create a relaxed and positive atmosphere. It will generate a good learning situation. In order to create a good learning environment, a teacher should maintain a good relationship between him/herself and the students. For examples, a teacher in a mixed ability class, can call the students by their names; learn about their interests and difficulties (Hess, 2001). In order to create a good learning atmosphere, the teacher should set certain rules. A teacher should also discuss those rules with the students.

The solution of the mixed ability class is to have an open class discussion and cooperation between the members of the class. It is also important to give clear information and instruction to the students. The teacher should use needs analysis, identify the learning style, learning strategies, learning motivation, learning enjoyment, learning strengths and weaknesses of the students. (Basu and Barman, 2013: p. 172-173)

The use of pair work is necessary in order to involve all the members of the class. Pair work promotes cooperation the classroom and make it a more relaxed and friendly place. The students learn to share responsibility rather than bearing the whole weight themselves. (Harmer, 2003: p, 116) In this case the instructor can pair students as similar ability and mixed ability. The use of questionnaire and interviews can be used as fundamental techniques.

Group work activities bring forth various qualities such as tolerance, team spirit, giving and taking, establishing a direction on learning, developing imaginative and creative thinking, developing a critical and informed mind. Teachers should

be aware of kind of grouping, size of grouping, lay-out of furniture, and seating arrangement.(Nunan: 1991)Special modules and worksheets can be developed for each student group. In this group, the weaker students will feel more able to contribute.

A whole class mingle activity involves the students with many different members of the class in a very short period of time to achieve different activities and tasks. In this case, any student will work with different leveled students. As a result, the students will experience stronger and weaker levels of experience. This mingling activity aids the weaker students and offers opportunities for the stronger students.

If the teachers know who the good and less good students are, they can arrange different groups and provide with a variety of material that is appropriate for each and every level student. While one group is working on tense, the other group might be doing a more advanced grammar exercise. (Harmer, 1998: p. 127).The instructor can simplify the texts, tasks, and questions if necessary.

In a mixed ability class, a teacher can encourage the students to do different tasks with the same material based on their competence. For example, for a reading comprehension there might be two sets of questions (set A, set B).Set A could be designed for all students, whereas set B could be designed only for the stronger students. Furthermore, in a language exercise, the teacher can ask for simple repetition from the weaker students, and can ask stronger students to use the target language in more complex sentences.

Considering the level and the interest of the students extra homework could be provided..In this regard Basu and Barman (2013) state, “It is straightforward to give different students different homework unless it is a part of standardized assessment procedure.”(p. 173) In this case, students can choose interesting and enjoyable individual or team projects. The homework is more applicable for the weaker students. At the beginning of the class, the teacher can use the same material for the whole class. Then the teacher can give strong students extension activities and weaker students more support. For example, a teacher can give all students a writing task. Then he can request the strong students to correct each other’s writing, and give weaker students examples of writing before they start writing.

Open ended questions or tasks contain more than single answer that allow each and every learner to perform.Ur states (2014) “invite the class to respond to stimulus tasks or questions that have a range of possible acceptable answers rather than a single right solution.” On the other hand, a closed ended question has only one right answer.

Visuals are always useful in a mixed ability class. Using colorful board markers, multimedia, OHD, is always useful for all age and proficiency levels. In this regard Ur (2014) states “Give them something to look at. These materials do not need to be particularly dramatic. When working in pairs or groups, referring to a particular visual element fosters collaboration.” Visuals grab the attention of the students. The passive learners are also interested in colorful and interesting posters.

5. Methodology

The research has been conducted in two stages. Two different methods have been followed to collect different kinds of data. First of all, a structured questionnaire was made to survey 18 tertiary teachers. Collected data have been used to purpose this study. After analyzing the data the responses were counted into percentage. In the second stage, 27 undergraduate students are brought under an intensive case study. The intensive case study has been chosen to identify which group is performing better in writing skill, heterogeneous or homogenous.

5.1 The Respondents

For the questionnaire survey, 18 undergraduate teachers from the Department of English have been selected from two private universities: Stamford University Bangladesh and East West University located in Dhaka. Among the teachers 12 are female and 6 are male. Their age varies from 25 to 40 years. The experience of the teachers varies from 2 to 13 years. Among the participants 5 are Assistant Professors, 5 are Senior Lecturers, and 8 are Lecturers. On the other hand, the intensive case study was conducted on a course titled “Technical Writing and Communication” in Spring 2015 in Civil Engineering (CEN) at Stamford University Bangladesh. The 27 participants were the students of batch 54A. The private universities were particularly chosen for the survey because their medium of instruction is English.

5.2 Data Collection Tools

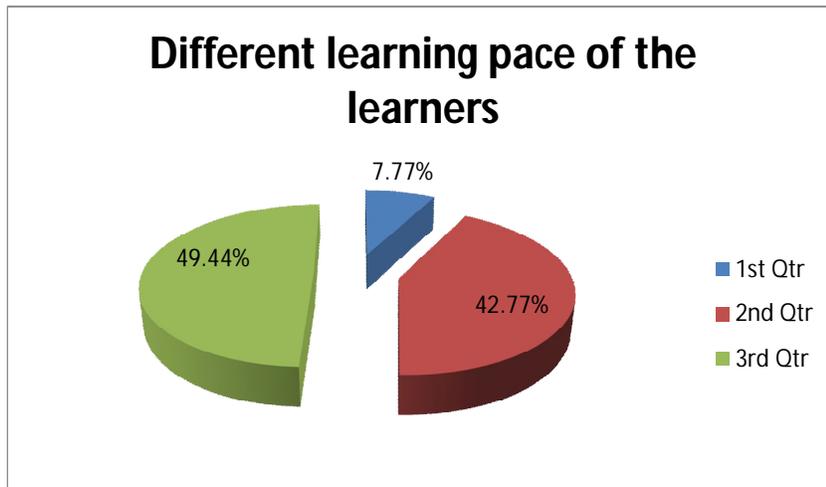
The data has been collected by applying both quantitative and qualitative approach. The questionnaire for the teachers contains 8 structured questions with 2 open ended questions. In the last open ended question the teachers are allowed to provide their valuable suggestions and recommendations. The questionnaires are selected for a comparative study. After collecting the survey results the responses are counted into percentage into a table. Through the questionnaire survey, it has become easy for the researcher to get a clear picture of the problems teachers face in the mixed ability writing class and to get the strategies and the suggestions or recommendations for further improvement. In this research, opinions and feedbacks of the respondents are given priority.

On the other hand, in the case study part the researcher at first diagnoses student’s writing skill by letting them write a paragraph and evaluate it. Then the researcher makes groups based on the diagnostic test. The researcher arranges the group heterogeneously and homogeneously and makes a comparative study between the two. After that for collecting data, group writing assignments and class test scripts have been evaluated.

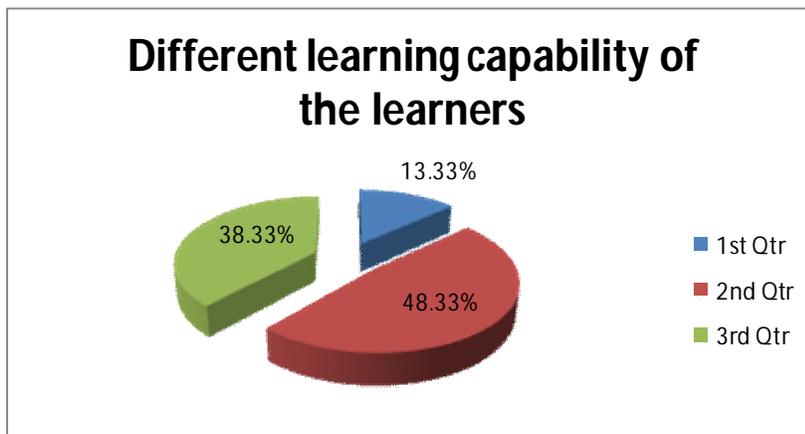
5.3 Analysis of Teachers’ Responses

After collecting data from the teacher’s questionnaire it has been found that the average number of students is 35 (ranging from 20-45) which means the classes are large classrooms. From the next question it has been found that 100% teachers consider their classroom as a mixed ability class.

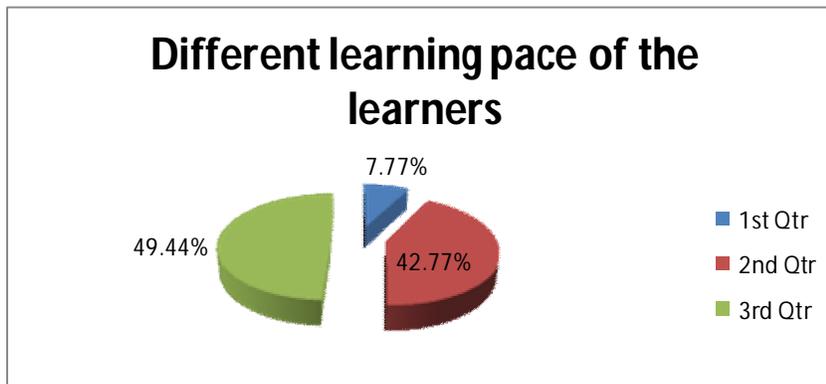
The third question was set to know the different percentage of students’ proficiency level. In reply it has been found that 11.11% students are highly proficient, 34.44% students are proficient, and 54.44% students are less proficient. Thus, majority of the students are less proficient.



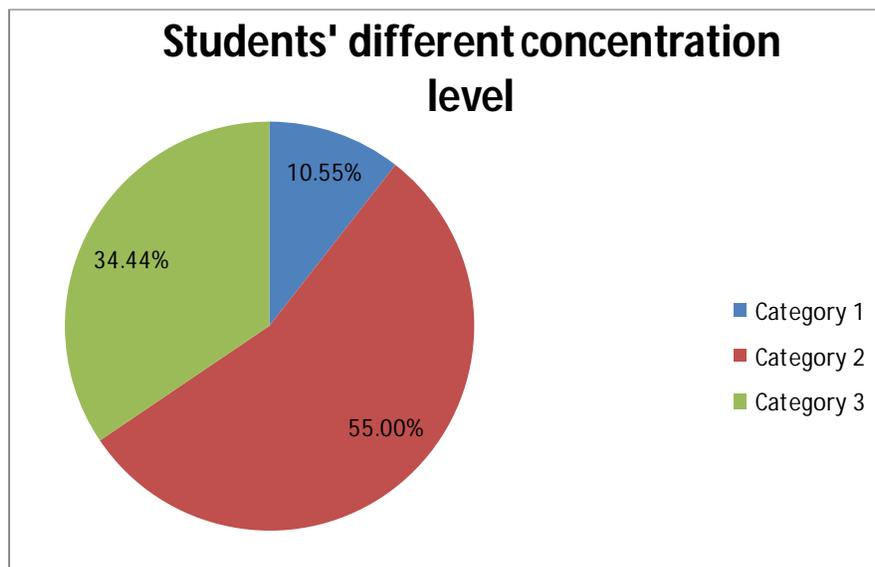
The fourth question was set to know the different learning capacity of the learners. In response of the question it has been found that 13.33% students are highly capable of learning, 48.33% students are moderately capable of learning, and 38.33% students are marginally capable of learning. From this response it has been identified that majority of the students are moderately capable of learning.



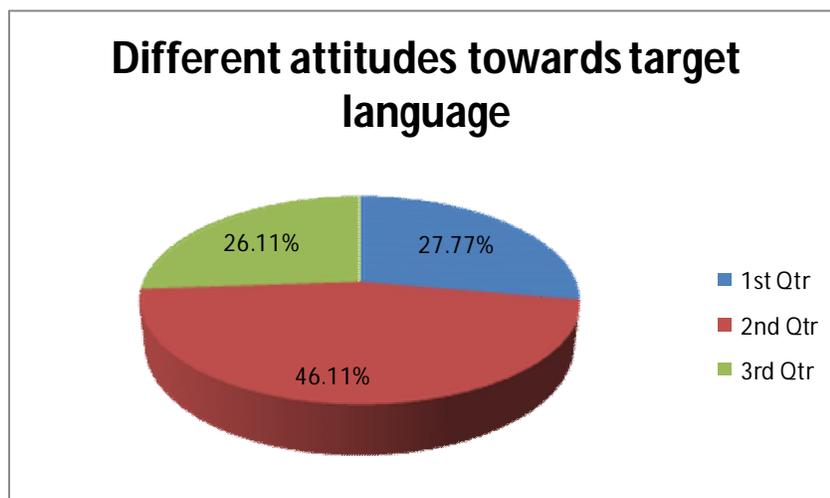
Question 5 was set to know the different learning pace of the learners. In reply, it has been identified that 7.77% students are fast paced learners, 49.44% students are moderate paced learners, and 42.77% students are slow paced learners. The reply proves that majority of the students are moderate paced learners.



Question 6 tried to get the variation of students' concentration level. It was found that 10.55% students show deep concentration, 55% students show shifting concentration, and 34.44% students show marginal concentration. Thus, most of the students show shifting concentration in the class.



The next question was set to know the different attitudes of the students towards target language, and it was found that 27.77% students show positive attitude towards target language, 46.11% students show mixed attitude, whereas 26.11% students show negative attitude towards target language. The result of the question identifies that majority of the students show mixed attitude towards target language.



The next question was asked to know the special challenges faced by the teachers in dealing with the tertiary level mixed ability English classroom. The 1st challenge was too large class, 2nd challenge was too short time to prepare varied material, and 3rd challenge was insufficient material faced by the teachers. In addition, difference of interest of the students was the 4th, difference of participation of the students was the 5th, stress on teachers was the 6th, and disciplinary problem was the 7th challenge faced by the teachers.

In the next question the teachers were asked to know the strategies that they can follow to deal with the mixed ability classrooms in teaching writing skill. In reply of the question, positive classroom environment, need analysis, group work, extra homework and extension activities, a variety of material, visuals, games and dramatization have been identified as the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th strategies that can be followed by the teachers.

The last question was asked to know the suggestions and recommendations regarding the improvement in writing skill in mixed ability language classroom. One teacher suggested that same handouts with differentiated instructions could be provided. Some teachers suggested counseling hours for weak students as one of the strategies to deal with mixed ability classroom. Some teachers suggested for guided writing, peer review, shared writing, team exam, and persuasive writing. Some other teachers opined for group work, assignments and peer work. One of the teachers suggested providing the students with samples of specific writing and then letting them check their own product with reference to a

checklist. Some said to include materials for all level of students. Concentrating on all the students has been identified one of the solutions in a mixed ability class. Some teachers suggested letting the students write process writing. One of the teachers opined to assign the students to read each other’s writing script and to let them provide feedback to each other. Based on that feedback the students can rewrite and finalize their writing.

Question Topic	Responses						
What is the average number of students in the language class	35						
Whether the classroom contains students of mixed ability	Yes(100%)			No(0%)			
What is the proficiency level of English of the students	Highly proficient (11.11%)		Proficient (34.44%)		Less proficient (54.44%)		
What is the learning capacity of the students	Highly capable of learning (13.33%)		Moderately capable of learning (48.33%)		Marginally capable of learning (38.33%)		
How do the students vary in learning pace	Fast paced learners (7.77%)		Moderate paced learners (49.44%)		Slow paced learners (42.77%)		
How do the students vary in attitude towards target language	Showing Deep concentration (10.55%)		Showing Shifting concentration (55%)		Showing Marginal concentration (34.44%)		
The challenges of a mixed ability English classroom	Too large class - 1st	Insufficient material- 1-3rd	Difference of interest of the students -4th	Difference of participation of the students-5th	Stress on teacher- 6th	Disciplinary problem- 7th	Too short time to prepare the material- 2nd
The strategies that a teacher can follow in a mixed ability language classroom	Positive classroom environment- 1st	Need analysis-2nd	Group work-3rd	A variety of materials-4th	Extra homework and extension activities- 5th	Visuals-6th	Games and dramatization-7th

Table: The questions asked to the teachers and their responses

5.4 Analysis of the Case Study

The case study was conducted on Civil Engineering Department (Batch-54 A). In the case study the researcher recorded the performance of the students. The Case study was conducted among 27 students. On the diagnostic test the students were given to write a paragraph on "Your Most Memorable Day". Then the paragraph was assessed by the course teacher. They got marks between 4-7.5. Based on the results of the diagnostic test, three membered 9 heterogeneous groups were formed by the instructor. Students who got marks from 6-7.5 were categorized as the strong students and who got below 6 was categorized as the weak students. A strong student was grouped with two weak students. They were given to write a "claim letter" for the group work. After the assessment of the group work, it was noticed that the groups obtained marks between 5-7.5. Finally, based on the first diagnostic test the students were grouped homogenously (strong with strong, and weak with weak) by the instructor and were given to write a "press release". After assessment of the adjustment letter it has been found that the group scored between 5-8. Thus, from this intensive case study it has been identified that in a mixed ability class, if the students are grouped homogenously they score better than the heterogeneous groups. But the strong groups score better than the weak groups. Besides, the students score better when they are included in a group.

Participant Information

Student's Name	Marks obtained in Diagnostic test(10)	Group A	Marks obtained in 1 st Class Test	Group B	Marks obtained in 2 nd Class Test
S1	6	S1	6	S1	7.5
S2	5.5	S2		S4	
S3	5	S3		S9	
S4	6.5	S4	6.5	S2	5
S5	5	S5		S3	
S6	5	S6		S5	
S7	4.5	S7	7	S6	5.5
S8	5	S8		S7	
S9	6	S9		S8	
S10	5.5	S10	5.5	S10	5
S11	7	S11		S12	
S12	5	S12		S13	
S13	5.5	S13		S11	

S14	5	S14	7	S15	8
S15	7.5	S15		S18	
S16	5.5	S16		S14	
S17	5.5	S17	6	S16	5.5
S18	6	S18		S17	
S19	5.5	S19		S20	
S20	6	S20	6.5	S22	7.5
S21	5	S21		S27	
S22	6.5	S22		S19	
S23	5.5	S23	6	S21	5
S24	5.5	S24		S23	
S25	4.5	S25		S24	
S26	4	S26	7.5	S25	6
S27	7	S27		S26	

6. Findings

From the responses of the teachers it has come to the light that all the teachers consider their classroom heterogeneous. In a mixed ability class most of the students are less proficient and moderately capable of learning. It has also been identified that most of the learners are moderately paced and show shifting concentration. From the response, it has also come to the light that most of the students show mixed attitude towards target language. From the response of another question, too large class, too short time to prepare varied materials, insufficient materials has been identified as the challenges in a mixed ability class faced by the teachers. Difference of interest of the students, difference of participation of the students, stress on teachers, disciplinary problems has also been identified as the barriers in a mixed ability class. From the reply of another question positive classroom environment, needs analysis, group work, a variety of materials, extra homework and extension activities, using visuals, games and dramatization have been recommended as the strategies that can be followed in a mixed ability class. Thus, from the overall discussions, it can be said that there are so many limitations and areas of improvement in a mixed ability class that should be taken into account.

From the case study it has been identified that the students should be grouped based on their writing ability. Homogenous strong groups can perform better writing skill than the weak groups. But if the students are grouped heterogeneously the strong students can assist weak students to improve their

writing skill. As a result, both the competent and the weak students feel motivated and become cooperative.

7. Recommendations

1. In a mixed ability class teachers should provide the students with good samples of writing. With reference to those samples the teacher could explain theories and structures of that piece of writing. Then the teacher could ask the students to write that specific piece of writing and then let them check their own product with reference to a checklist. In this way, the teacher lets the learners learn from mistakes. Time to time, the teacher could give them support and guideline.
2. The students can be given process writing as pair work or as group work. In process writing, the students go through multiple stages and there are much scope of drafting, revising, editing the writing skill. The teacher can ask the students to submit the first draft and final version and judge the final product.
3. Teachers should let the students do guided writing, peer review, shared writing, team exam, and persuasive writing. In addition, students should also be given group work, assignments and peer work.
4. Same handouts with differentiated instructions could be provided. The language of the handouts should be comprehensible to all level of students.
5. The students can be assigned to read each other's writing script and provide feedback to each other. Based on that feedback the students can rewrite and finalize their writing.
6. Teachers should include materials for all level of students. For the strong students teachers can arrange some difficult and extended exercise.
7. In a mixed ability language class teachers should allocate counseling hours after or before the class for the weak students.
8. Teachers should put concentration on all the students in a mixed ability class. Teachers should not express their biasness to stronger students and look down the weaker students. Each and every student should be treated equally.
9. Students should be grouped of mixed levels or similar ones. They may be grouped strong with strong, weak with weak or strong with weak. Strong with strong groups can perform better, but the weak with weak student score poor number. In a group work weak students will be motivated and

encouraged by the other members of the group. The weak student can contribute ideas towards the class activities and feel that they are not neglected. The strong students also feel like a member of a team. But all classroom tasks and activities cannot be assigned as group works because there are some students who prefer working on their own. In doing group work, teachers need to provide a variety of learning activities that will help the learners to renew their interest and pay attention.

8. Limitations of the study

Though the aims and objectives of the study were well defined, some limitations need to be considered for further improvement. The research was conducted on a small range among twenty seven students and eighteen teachers; thus, more teachers and students could not be included due to money and time constraint. The survey and the case study were conducted only in the capital, universities situated in other cities and small towns could be included for further investigation. Another limitation of the study is that only teacher beliefs have been surveyed. If students were included the researcher could find the gap between the beliefs between the teachers and the learners. However this small range of research could be used as a sample guideline to carry out research for a larger range.

Conclusion

In tertiary level, among the four communicative skills, writing is the most important and focused one. Mixed ability class is universal and in a mixed ability class teachers face different challenges to teach writing skill. But if teachers apply and practice different effective strategies to teach writing skill, the mixed ability classroom can be considered as a divine boon. The suggestions and recommendations discussed above are just a small part of the things the teachers should do with students in order to teach writing skill. Though homogenous strong students perform better, if strong students are grouped with weak students it will give forth to tolerance, team spirit, giving and sharing, creativity. Furthermore, in a mixed ability class it is important for the teachers to bear in mind the heterogeneity of the students and to create a good atmosphere where all the students feel comfortable and ask questions without feeling fearful. Finally, in a mixed ability class if the teachers can understand the needs of the students, they can achieve the target learning goal.

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Appendix

Survey Questionnaire for the Teachers

I am carrying out a research on “Teaching Writing Skill in Mixed Ability Classes: A Case Study in Bangladesh”. Please complete the following questionnaire in light of your own experience and opinion. All information provided by you will be kept highly confidential.

Name of the Institution:

Type of the Institution:

Teaching Experience:

Age:

Gender:

Contact No:

E-mail:

1. What is the average number of students in your language class? -----
2. Do you consider your classroom as a mixed ability class?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. How do the students of your class differ in proficiency level of English? (Indicate the percentage)
 - a. Very proficient
 - b. Proficient
 - c. Not proficient at all
4. How do the students of your class differ in learning capacity? (Indicate the percentage)

- a. Highly capable of learning b. Moderately capable of learning c. Marginally capable of learning
5. How do the students of your class vary in learning pace? (Indicate the percentage)
 - a. Fast paced learning b. Moderate paced learning c. Slow paced learning
6. How do your students vary in concentration level? (Indicate the percentage)
 - a. Showing deep concentration b. Showing shifting concentration c. Showing marginal concentration
7. How do the students vary in attitude towards target language? (Indicate the percentage)
 - a. Showing positive attitude b. Showing mixed attitude c. Showing negative attitude
8. Which of the following are the special challenges in dealing with tertiary level mixed ability English classroom? (Mention the chronological order)
 - a. Too large class
 - b. Insufficient material
 - c. Difference of interest of the students
 - d. Difference of participation of the students
 - e. Stress on teacher
 - f. Disciplinary problem
 - g. Too short time to prepare varied material
9. What are the strategies that you can follow to deal with the mixed ability classrooms in teaching writing skill? (Indicate the order chronologically)
 - a. Positive classroom environment
 - b. Need analysis
 - c. Group work
 - d. A variety of materials
 - e. Extra homework and extension activities
 - e. Games and dramatization
 - f. Visuals
10. What are your suggestions or recommendations regarding improving writing skill in mixed ability language class?