

Challenges in Teaching English to the Heterogeneous Class in Professional Courses

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Abstract

English is integrated into professional courses to hone the communication skills of students to pursue their course successfully and excel in their chosen programme. Since professionals need communicative competence to be successful in their career. The language teacher in engineering colleges has a tremendous pedagogic challenge, to develop language skills among students with mixed abilities within a single classroom. As the students entering into professional courses after their 10+2 education, these have different levels of English language competency; their comprehension levels and language problems are all different. The teacher faces difficulty in teaching the language and fulfilling their specific linguistic needs like vocabulary development, writing skills, and speaking skills. This paper discusses the challenges faced by English language teachers in dealing with a heterogeneous class, especially, in professional colleges.

Keyword: Communication Skills, English Language Competency, Professional Courses

Introduction

A heterogeneous class is one that has different kinds of learners in it, different from a 'homogeneous' class, where the learners are similar. There is in fact no such thing as a 'homogeneous' class, since no two learners are really similar; and therefore all classes of more than one learner are in fact heterogeneous. Here, the class involves learners from different levels of linguistic and communicative competencies. Therefore, the task of an English teacher teaching especially at professional courses is challenging.

Why It's Heterogeneous?

In ancient times all learners used to be homogenous, belonging to the same race, caste, religion, gender and age in India. But the homogenous class gave way to the heterogeneous class, because of the following reasons.

Educational Policies

Education had been opened up to all castes and classes of India during the British period, and continued after the Indian Independence, as a political necessity. In the modern period, educational opportunities are opened to all men and women all over the world. With this people have realized the growing need of education and started to avail themselves of the newly available educational opportunities. As a result, the classrooms in India today, especially at engineering colleges consist of learners from various backgrounds, languages, castes, classes, cultures and religions belonging to every age group.

Migration

The second reason for the heterogeneous class is the constant mobility or migration of the people from one region of the country to another region for varied reasons. The modern man has become more and more mobile in search of better educational and employment opportunities. As a result, classrooms in the urban schools and colleges have begun to contain learners belonging to the regions and languages other than the local ones.

Choice of Language

Students have been given language choices at the school level in selecting the first language, the second language and the third language. Since English is the medium of instruction in engineering courses; many of the students have not had the English language as medium of instruction until they enter their professional courses.

Flexibility of Norms in Engineering Programme Admission

Though the medium of study in engineering courses is English, English language competency is not tested during admission. Admissions to the engineering colleges are mostly based on their grades during the higher secondary exams and later some entrance exams. They have never been tested on their communicative competence in English.

Challenges in Mixed Ability Classes

Mixed ability group in engineering colleges creates problem for both students and teachers. An English teacher has to meet the linguistic needs of all the learners to pursue their professional courses successfully and to increase their employability opportunities. Some of the problems of an English teacher in heterogeneous classes are seen in the following paragraphs.

Difference in Learning Style

Heterogeneous learner's preferences and learning styles are seen to be varied based on their language proficiency. Each student comes from a different origin, a different learning background, which stands as a barrier to meeting the needs of the students and ultimately it results in poor language acquisition. Though it is difficult for the teacher to know about each student and to follow what him/her during the lessons even in small classes, it is essential for teachers to monitor each and every student and to help them walk through their difficult learning areas in a variety of ways, to achieve effective teaching.

Text Book

Williams (1983: 251): "In situations where there is a shortage of trained teachers, language teaching is very closely tied to the textbook. (...) The textbook can be a tyrant to the teacher who, in his or her preoccupation with covering the syllabus, feels constrained (...). Textbooks take on a very important role in language classroom. Since most language textbooks are designed for an ideal homogeneous classroom environment, teachers always have to deal with the problem that students react to the textbook differently due their individual differences." In the heterogeneous class some students may find the textbook monotonous, on the other hand some of them may find it interesting. Moreover, language teaching course materials are currently based on content-based or theme-based syllabi, some students may find the topics dull, strange, or meaningless, whereas others may find it enjoyable, familiar or interesting. So, it is the duty of the teacher to prepare and supply the materials accordingly.

Teaching Methodology

Language teaching has to be different from teaching other subjects. It needs a holistic and unique approach to instill in the learners the essential linguistic confidence to excel in

their career. Teachers are facing great difficulty in adopting a dynamic method to teach the heterogeneous learners, since their perception and understanding will be greatly varied based on their language proficiency.

Learners' Interest and Participation

In the teaching and learning process, attitudes and interests play a positive role. Without the eagerness or zeal of the learners, language attainment will not take place. Some students feel lessons are boring in the class, as the topic has no familiarity with their own life or their interests. Furthermore, some of the students may not be interested in the lesson, unless they do get a chance to express their own ideas, since the teacher talks too much during the lesson or the other students take many turns. Hence, teachers should be aware of the different interests of the students to organize and to arrange activities in accordance with the provision of the learner centric approach.

Discipline

The greatest challenge faced by the teacher in heterogeneous classroom in this digital era is discipline. Since their learning styles are different, it may lead to distraction from their assigned task. The bright students will always finish the tasks before the other students. As a result, they may misbehave while waiting for the others to finish. The weaker students, on the other hand, cannot finish the tasks as quickly as the strong ones and may lose their confidence and/or show ill-mannered behaviour. Consequently, mixed abilities may result in classroom management problems and ineffective learning. It is the duty of the teacher to analyze the situation and employ a multi-dimensional approach to impart language skills.

Remedies

A congenial environment must be created with the advent of new technologies to fulfil the need of each and every student of a mixed ability classroom.

Positive guidelines, right direction and motivation can be the key factors in improving their linguistic competency.

Traditional teaching can be replaced with a collaborative and group learning activity.

A good rapport between a teacher and students must be created to transform the knowledge and skill from the teacher to the learners.

Conclusion

As language teachers we have to find innovative ways to inspire our students and get them **involved** in their task. It has been a challenging experience for the teachers of English language to tackle the problems in the non-homogeneous classrooms. It is the responsibility of language teachers to search out some solutions for the problems and help the learners to attain their goal.

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