

Teaching Large Mixed-Ability Classroom: Effective Teaching Strategies and Classroom Management

Gildo Capingana João, Miguel Armindo João,

Department of Multidisciplinary Sciences, Faculty of Social Services of University of Luanda

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ABSTRACT

This work is a proposal for effective lesson in large and mixed-ability classrooms that have been a tough concern for teachers, in terms of teaching strategy and classroom management in Angolan context. Therefore, from the question “How to deal with large and mixed ability classroom for an effective language teaching-learning”, the study is aimed to set up some useful teaching and management strategies for teachers to overcome or minimize the difficulties and challenges faced in these classrooms. By the nature of the study, it is a narrative literary review in which different published materials were consulted. The findings suggest that although large and mixed-abilities classrooms have disadvantages, the advantages open the opportunities for teachers to lead an effective learning process by arranging learners in pair works, role-plays and oral presentations, in such a way of making them working as a team, and learning through their own experiences as well.

Keywords: large classrooms, mixed-abilities, teaching

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English Language provides challenges every single day. In Angolan context, teacher has to face 45 or 70 learners at the same time with individual differences in terms of understanding, language skill, communicative abilities, and learners with variable motivation for learning and personal interests and experiences. Schools in Angola are often large and mixed-ability classes. Many authors state that large classes can save funds, so, schools do not have to employ many teachers, and have good results though, but it is not yet a reality in a large number of schools and universities in Angola. Thus, in order to conduct this study, the research question is stated as “How to deal with large and mixed ability classroom for an effective teaching-learning”? To answer the questions, we resorted to a research under qualitative approaches. What happens lastly in the classroom realities is that teachers feel difficult to engage learners in learning and they feel it hard to have opportunities to participate in classroom activities. As according to (Trang, 2015, p. 76) the large and mixed-ability classes are recognized, it is applied universal teaching and management strategies. Therefore, we seek to describe the large and mixed abilities, as well as addressing some methods and strategies to deal with this kind of classes.

Aim of the study

The aim of our research is to set up some useful teaching and management strategies to deal with large and mixed-ability classes for an effective English Language Teaching.

METHODOLOGY

We consider the study as a pure/bibliographic research under qualitative approach once during the research conduction, in terms of procedure, we seek for bibliographic sources through deep reading of documents already published, and it was carried out under qualitative approach.

Large and mixed-abilities classes

The right number of students for a classroom is a matter of many different perspectives. (Ur, 1996, p. 302) Specifically proposes that “the exact number does not really matter: what matters is how you, the teacher, see the class size in your own specific situation”, but according to Baker and (Baker & Westrup, 2000) in , “a large class can be any number of students, if the teacher feels there are too many students for them all to make progress”. By other side, (Elia, 2025), states that there is no student ration for a classroom in general. The number is stated according to specific countries or states, but in Angola for example, the number of learners per class reaches generally 43 learners that is already considered a big amount according to (Unesco, 2025), in spite of having class with much more than this number.

There is a long-standing belief that the number of learners in a class affects the quality of the learning environment. In particular, large classes are believed to correlate with low learners’ performance. However, class size at the end of itself is not a distinguishing feature of learner performance; instead, class size matters in relation to education goals and the quality of the educational experience.

Different scholars have defined this topic in many ways using the different perspectives gained from different learning environments. Trang (2015) for instance, describes a mixed-ability class as comprising of not only learners with various capacities but also those that have a broad range of preferences and learning styles. They can also be referred to as a variation of learners in their abilities in grammatical knowledge, fluency and accuracy, size of vocabulary, receptive and productive skills (Valenc, 2005). Notably, many factors like their attitude, motivation, and self-discipline may differ from one learner to another (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). These differences make it difficult for the teachers to effectively plan for their lessons to ensure that all their learners obtain the required benefits from the lesson. “This is especially a challenge for the language instructors who are not equipped with the required skills and teaching methods to deal with mixed-ability classes” (Al-Ansari, 2013).

Most institutions have sorted to address this problem by dividing the classes according to their ages. Nevertheless, these classes are still multileveled since it is still deemed random when individual abilities are considered. Studies have shown that random grouping does not incorporate the level of ability and attainment skills of individual learners. This results in various challenges to the teachers who try to give equal opportunities for learning to all the learners in the class (Boaler, 2008).

So far, it becomes apparent that the concept of large class size is subjective, largely contextualized and situational based. Therefore, a large class in Angola can be a small class in Namibia or vice versa, because the teaching contexts differ.

However, apart from large class, most teachers have to teach mixed ability groups but they do use mixed ability teaching strategies. McKeonwn (2004) believes that many teachers see a mixed ability class as consisting of a group of average and able individual with a subset of learners who has learning problems.

Ireson & Hallam (2001) stress that once teacher has recognized a mixed-ability class because of learners’ different strengths and weaknesses and different rates of improvements, teacher is obliged to be creative enough and to have a positive attitude. Moreover, teachers who has a positive attitude towards the diversity in terms of learners’ abilities are more successful in the teaching of mixed-ability classes. Planning for specific tasks of the various levels of ability of the learners will ensure that all learners are engaged in the learning process and at personal levels and this, in turn, will ensure efficiency and success in the teaching of mixed-ability classes.

Mixed-ability classes generally refer to classes where learners have a broad range of levels in their achievement and learning. The learners in these classes differ in strengths and weaknesses and have different approaches to learning. According to (Ainslie, 1994) mixed-ability classes means classes where learners differ greatly in ability, motivation for learning English, needs, interests, educational background, styles of learning, anxiety, experiences and so on.

Large and Mixed-Ability Class Teaching Methodology

Research indicates that learners experience fewer lapses in attention during “learner-centred” activities such as demonstrations and opportunities to ask questions compared to a lecture, and that this improved attention carries through a lecture segment when such learner-centred activities precede it, compared to vice versa (Briggs, 2014). Briggs also suggests switching up activities “every 15 minutes or so” as a rule of thumb.

In a study of learners’ emotional responses to feedback from instructors among first-year university learners, (Shields, 2015) noted the prevalence of anxiety and blows to confidence in learners when faced with negative feedback from faculty, and how this can act as a barrier to class performance. To address this threat to learners’ engagement, the author recommends supplying learners with many opportunities to practice writing skills in low-stakes assignments and offering timely feedback that indicates whether learners are on the right track—in other words, to incorporate more formative assessment measures in a course.

A proposal by (Hayes, 1997) is that introducing active learning and formative assessment in large classes can be beneficial for both learners and teachers in terms of their engagement and development. The author defines active learning as “meaningful learning activities that require higher-order thinking and the development of skills over the mere transfer of information” and refers to formative assessment as “information communicated to a learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behaviour for the purpose of improving learning”.

Their findings indicate that these methodologies can result in improved learners’ engagement, retention of material, consolidation of understanding, and motivation. (Bloom, 1956) Refers to the value of “active participation” in the classroom being dependent upon learners participation, moreover, (Hornsby & Osman, 2014, p. 716) argue that a conceptual change and learner-focused model is superior to an information transmission and teacher-focused model when it comes to challenging learners to think deeply, critically and creatively in large classes.

For teaching large and mixed-abilities classes, some authors suggest some principles and strategies as follow:

Using group Work and Pair Work

Most researchers suggest cutting a big class into small groups. Harmer (2007, p. 117) for instance suggests the use of pair work and group work as in large classes, pair work and group work play an important part since they maximize learners participation”.

Using Role-Plays and Oral Presentations

Role-plays are good for intermediate and advanced learners. In large classes, in order to engage all learners in classroom activities, teachers can also use role-plays. According to (Trang, 2015, p. 78) learners are given a part of a play in a fictitious situation and act out the characters of the play. They will then work together to see how each character reacts in the given situation. However, in order to help learners succeed with their role-plays, teachers should make sure they know the language and the information needed for the role-plays.

Moving on to the mixed-ability classes, several strategies influence teachers to think in a different way to help their learners attain academic success. The delimitation strategy has grown in status by becoming a recurring theme in classroom teaching strategies (Tomlinson, 2001). Teachers can divide their learners into various groups, incorporating different learner-centred methods to improve on their study and to motivate them to participate more in their preferred learning method. Some of the learner-centred methods include; game competition, in-class activities, extra homework, and dramatization (Pedersen & Kronborg, 2014).

To help address the challenges in mixed-ability classes, the teachers should incorporate other strategies like open-ended plans, contingency plans, appeal to all senses, self-access centres, and personalized tasks to their teaching methods. To enhance the effectiveness in the teaching of language in these classes, there should be good management of classroom activity coupled with effectiveness of presentation and the use of teaching aids such as audio-visual material in the learning process.

Harris (2004) suggests that an alternative approach would be to focus on helping learners to become more effective learners. They recommend giving learners more ownership, in not only the choice of content but also in how they go about learning.

Teaching a mixed ability class will work if all learners are allowed to experience success and to learn as individuals. It is less likely to be successful if teachers insist on whole class teaching and teaching to the average learners.

It is unrealistic to expect any group of learners whatever the ability to work through a body of work at exactly the same pace. Two thirds of learners will be working out of their learning style unless the type of task is varied. Fisher (2001) suggests that many learners do not achieve their potential because they are told to make a journey but they have no map. No learner can overcome blocks to learning if he/she have not learnt how to learn.

Teachers should act as role models for learning and teach learners how to become independent and effective learners. They will be more motivated if they understand the aim of a lesson and have some input. The teacher should reflect on classroom practice, adopt a problem solving approach to any difficulties identified and experiment with a range of approaches.

Teachers need to accept their new role first as learners themselves and facilitators of learning so that they come in the classroom ready for the lesson. Tomlinson (1999, p. 28) says that “a secure teacher comes away from today with important questions to puzzle about overnight and the belief that today contains the insights necessary for a more effective tomorrow”, it means that the emphasis is not on what teachers teach but on what learners learn.

Meeting the Individual Needs of Students

According to (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 24), [students] already come to us differentiated. It just makes sense that we would differentiate our instruction in response to them.

Using Variety to Cover the Different Learning Styles

In a large and mixed-ability class, learners' preferences covers all four skills: listening, reading, writing and listening. Each skill receives a similar number of votes. Almost the same number of pupils like speaking and dislike speaking. It will show that learners vary so much in their likes and dislikes. It will never be possible for a teacher to please learners all the time. However, variety in the lesson plans is important to use.

Catering for the Different Learning Styles

Visual learners process information most effectively when they can see what they are learning e.g. through reading, writing and observing. Auditory learners need to hear information to help them learn e.g. via oral presentations.

Kinaesthetic learners learn better when they can manipulate objects e.g. by doing, touching and moving (Nordlund, 2003). Moreover, theory of multiple intelligences suggests that learners need to show their knowledge in different ways e.g. via pictures, talking or acting (Nordlund, 2003). The easiest way to do this is to take a reading exercise and to allow learners to respond in different ways to the texts. Teachers may offer pupils a menu of activities using the different skills and let them choose their activities. A weather forecast can be turned into a listening, reading, speaking or writing activity.

Open and Creative Tasks

Learners could be given an open and creative task which allows them to work at their own level. The tasks will depend on the learners level, in primary levels for example, it may involve making up a dream timetable, a mini school handbook (e.g. name of school, times, clubs etc.) the design of a school uniform and a play

outlining activities at school. At high schools, it may put learners writing sentences or paragraphs about something they like, changing information by written messages. In universities for example, learners may create paragraphs or essays expressing their thoughts and emotions, exchanging information by writing as well and soon.

Higher Level Thinking Skills

Another way of differentiating work is to take a higher-level text and use Bloom's taxonomy to make up more challenging questions for the more able. (Bloom, 1956) Describes six levels of thinking that are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation and synthesis.

Learners that are more able often need less time developing the basic facts at the knowledge and comprehension levels. For example, instead of just getting learners to list what furniture is in each room, teacher could pose a more challenging question e.g. which bedroom would learners most like to have – and ask them to give reasons for their answer.

Similarly, instead of asking learners about family members, or to describe a property, teacher can ask which family seems closest to learners' own family and which of the properties they would choose to buy respectively.

Tiered Activities

In any class, there will be times when some learner has mastered a point while others need reinforcement. This is where using tiered activities can be effective. It means that some learners needed more reinforcement while others get quickly the idea.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Teaching Large Classroom

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The advantages of teaching large classes include decreased instructor costs, efficient use of faculty time and talent, availability of resources, and standardization of the learning experience (McLeod, 1998). However, there are significant disadvantages to large classes, including strained impersonal relations between students and the instructor, limited range of teaching methods, discomfort among instructors teaching large classes, and a perception that faculty who teach large classes are of lower status at the institution (McLeod, 1998).

According to (Hayes, 1997) the problems associated with teaching in large classes are classified into five categories: 1) Discomfort caused by the physical constraints; 2) Control problems (discipline aspects); 3) Lack of individual attentions; 4) Difficulty on evaluation; 5) Problems of charging learning effectiveness.

To summarize, it is difficult to teach large class since during the lesson process it is difficult for teacher to:

- Discipline the class, especially for primary and middle school learners who lack self-control;
- Satisfy all the needs of learners who have different interests, personalities and capabilities;
- Organize efficient class activities due to the constraints of time and space;
- Provide equal chances for the students to participate and practice;
- Give timely and effective feedback and evaluation.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Teaching Mixed-Ability Classroom

Teaching mixed-ability classes is a reality face by many language teacher, even though they are often outshined by the challenges. Moreover, some advantages of this teaching this kind of classes are the following:

- These classes provide interesting learning environments because they are composed of a rich pool of diverse skills, dispositions and perspectives.

- The interactions in these classes enable the students to be more creative and innovative as they learn from each other's unique abilities.
- The learners have between them more life experience and knowledge, more opinions that are varied, more interest and ideas – all of what can be used in classroom interaction.

It can be complemented three more advantages in detail by saying that large and mixed-ability classes can provide more opportunities for co-students' interaction, foster an atmosphere of cooperation and encourage creativity and innovation. Therefore, as noted by (Lewis & Woodward, 1988), "large classes bring not only challenges but also opportunities for teachers".

In other side, the difficulties faced by language teachers in mixed-ability classes are often numerous and invariably lead to frustrations on their part since they are unable to create a productive learning and teaching environment for their students.

As (Mayer, 2008) states, teachers in a regular classroom are always put under intense pressure to address the needs of their diverse learners, and Ur (2000) and Hess (2001), argue that mixed-ability classes can provide richer human resources and greater opportunities for creativity than smaller class, they notice that more students mean more ideas, and hence more opinions and possibilities.

Further Remarks

It is clearly seen mixed-ability classes in almost every classes, and although large class is a relative concept, it is not advised because in this classroom teachers hardly keep discipline in the class, achieve their goals, and satisfy all the students' needs who have different interests, personalities and capabilities. Once teachers must act according to the learners' need and give homework according to the capacity of each student, in the large classroom context teacher cannot perform like that due to the time.

Moreover, in large classroom teacher may find difficulties to organize efficiently the class activities due to the constraints of time and space.

Another reason for not advice the large classroom is the deferent chances teacher has to create for students to participate and practice the language. It has more probability for teacher to pay more attention to the student that sit in front than those who sit back and vice versa, and there is not opportunity to create a give timely and effective feedback and evaluation to all the students.

However, in spite of be against large classrooms, we think teachers can have a good classroom or the learners can have a fun class or understanding of the lesson in the class by using the techniques such as pair work, role-plays and oral presentations. We think also that if teacher use these techniques he or she can achieve his or her goal in the classroom and on top of that, learners will learn, and what is better, due to the situation learners will learn by doing and what we learn by our own we hardly forget.

Teaching a mixed ability class will work if all students are allowed to experience success and to learn as individuals. It is less likely to be successful if a teacher's insists on whole class teaching and teaching to the average students. It is unrealistic to expect any group of students whatever the ability to work through a body of work at exactly the same pace. Moreover, since there are benefits and detriments in teaching mixed-ability class, we think it is positive to have and to teach a mixed-ability class because everyone can and will learn with each other.

Teacher dealing with large and mixed-ability classrooms, need to view large classes from a different perspective and recognize that despite many disadvantages, they can also provide many opportunities for teaching and learning methodologies, in which teachers can apply many experimental teaching styles to fit the learners' various levels and personal styles. In other side, teacher must also know that in teaching mixed-ability classes, one of the most important aspects is to put learners working as a team and working on their own experiences.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, problems and difficulties of teaching associated with large classes can also be found in smaller classes. Therefore, teachers need to enhance their innovative awareness and capabilities for developing effective ways for dealing with large classes based on the characteristics of large classes.

Lastly but not the least, teachers should be involved in the training programs and equipped with the ideal leadership skills to help them to deal with any challenging situation that arise in their learning environments.

Moreover, in order to address the challenges in large mixed-ability classes, teachers should incorporate other strategies like open-ended plans, contingency plans, and appeal to all senses, self-access centers, group tasks to their teaching methods, using group work and pair work and using role-plays and oral presentations. Based on the techniques above, teacher can teach large classes and on top of that, s/he can achieve the teaching goal that is developing learner's abilities in the target language. Due to the mixed-ability classes, we think teachers must know the abilities of each learner in the classroom so that s/he can give them individual homework. This is something that hardly happens in schools of Angola, as teachers use to give the same homework to all the students.

Resumo

Este trabalho é uma proposta para aula eficaz em turmas grandes e com habilidades mistas em termos de estratégias de ensino e gestão da sala de aula no contexto angolano. No entanto, partindo da questão "Como lidar com turmas grandes e com habilidades mistas?", o estudo foi conduzido com o objectivo de estabelecer algumas estratégias úteis de ensino e gestão para os professores superarem ou minimizarem as dificuldades e desafios encontrados grandes nestas salas de aulas. Pela natureza do estudo, trata-se de uma pesquisa narrativa de revisão literária em que foram consultados diversos materiais publicados. Os resultados sugerem que embora as salas de aulas grandes e com habilidades mistas tenham desvantagens, as vantagens abrem oportunidades para os professores conduzirem um processo de aprendizagem eficaz, organizando os alunos em trabalhos em par, representação de papéis e apresentações orais, duma forma a fazê-los trabalhar como uma equipa, bem como aprender por suas próprias experiências.

Palavras-chave: turmas grandes; habilidades mistas; Ensino

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