



Bridging Language Gaps: Nurturing Interactive Learning in Diverse Classrooms

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Abstract

This study explores the role of teachers in facilitating effective language interaction among mixed-ability students in an Islamic boarding school EFL context. Using qualitative methods, including classroom observations of 32 students and semi-structured interviews with five experienced English teachers, the research examines challenges in mixed-ability instruction and teachers' pedagogical strategies. The findings highlight three key challenges: disparities in material comprehension, uneven participation patterns, and varying student interest levels. In response, teachers adopted three distinct pedagogical roles: demonstrators, who modeled linguistic behaviors; conductors, who orchestrated inclusive classroom dynamics; and commentators, who provided targeted feedback across ability levels. This study contributes to understanding effective mixed-ability language instruction and offers practical insights for educators managing diverse proficiency levels. The findings underscore the importance of flexible, multi-faceted teaching approaches that accommodate diverse learning needs while maintaining instructional coherence in mixed-ability classrooms.

Keywords: Interaction, Teacher's role, Mix-ability of students

1. Introduction

Language interaction is a cornerstone of effective communication and successful language acquisition in educational settings. As fundamental research has established, the interactive nature of language learning serves as both a medium and catalyst for developing essential language competencies (Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023). This dynamic process enables learners to engage meaningfully with the target language, facilitating comprehension and production skills through authentic communication experiences. Recent studies have further emphasized that structured interaction provides learners with crucial opportunities for language input and output practice, which are vital to language acquisition (Loewen & Sato, 2018).

Creating and maintaining an interactive classroom environment presents particular challenges in language learning contexts. Teachers must transcend their traditional role as content providers to become facilitators of authentic communication (Thanh, 2020). Research indicates that effective language instruction requires teachers to cultivate an environment where students feel empowered to communicate freely, enhancing their motivation to engage with the target language (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008). This spontaneous interaction proves crucial in developing language proficiency, as it helps students build confidence while reducing the anxiety commonly associated with second language production.

The complexity of fostering meaningful interaction increases significantly in mixed-ability classrooms, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. These environments typically comprise students with varying levels of language proficiency, diverse learning rates, and differing degrees of motivation. Al-Subaiei (2017) identifies several challenges inherent in mixed-ability classrooms, including disparate skill levels, varied personality types, and distinct learning needs. These differences often manifest in uneven participation patterns,

fluctuating interest levels, and potential classroom management issues, necessitating specialized pedagogical approaches.

To address these challenges effectively, teachers must adopt multiple roles—facilitators, conductors, and guides—while implementing targeted strategies to support language interaction in mixed-ability settings. This multifaceted approach requires creating inclusive activities, adapting materials to accommodate diverse proficiency levels, and fostering mutual respect and encouragement. Recent research by Maviş & Dursun (2021) emphasizes the importance of teachers facilitating authentic classroom interaction by allowing students to take active roles while supporting their intrinsic motivation. This delicate balance requires teachers to alternate roles as demonstrators, directors, and commentators, providing guidance without dominating classroom discourse.

This study examines the critical role of teachers in promoting effective language interaction among mixed-ability students within an Islamic boarding school setting, where students' diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying rates of language acquisition provide a rich context for investigation. The research specifically focuses on three key areas: the difficulties mixed-ability students face in achieving effective language interaction, the techniques teachers use to facilitate and monitor language interaction in various classroom settings, and the practical strategies that improve interaction among students with various language proficiency. An Islamic boarding school setting is especially useful for this study because it has students from various linguistic backgrounds who learn languages at different rates. This gives us a unique chance to examine how mixed-ability language learning works and what teaching methods work best.

Through this investigation, this study makes significant contributions to the existing literature on language education by examining the intersection of mixed-ability teaching and language interaction in a specialized educational context, identifying effective strategies for managing diverse language proficiency levels, and providing practical insights for educators working in similar educational settings. The findings aim to enhance understanding of how teachers can effectively facilitate language interaction in mixed-ability classrooms, ultimately leading to improved language acquisition outcomes for all students. This research addresses a gap in current literature regarding mixed-ability language instruction in Islamic boarding schools and offers practical implications for teachers working in diverse educational contexts worldwide.

2. Methods

Data collection in this empirical investigation primarily employed two qualitative instruments: systematic classroom observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The observational phase was meticulously designed to examine the multifaceted dynamics of EFL classroom interaction, particularly analyzing verbal and non-verbal communication patterns in teacher-student discourse and peer-to-peer exchanges. The study encompassed a sample of 32 participants drawn from two fourth-semester English classes at an Islamic Boarding School, ensuring a representative cohort for comprehensive analysis. This tertiary-level institution maintains rigorous academic standards, with all enrolled students having successfully completed their secondary education, thus providing a mature learning environment conducive to sophisticated linguistic interaction.

The researcher adopted a non-participant observational stance to minimize intervention effects while systematically documenting classroom dynamics. This methodological approach facilitated objectively examining teachers' pedagogical roles in fostering interactive learning environments. Data collection instruments included detailed field notes supplemented by high-definition video recordings, enabling subsequent micro-analysis of subtle interactional features and pedagogical strategies to accommodate students of varying proficiency levels.

The observation protocol was structured to capture planned and spontaneous classroom interaction, particularly to turn-taking patterns, error correction strategies, and scaffolding techniques utilized in mixed-ability settings.

The study incorporated comprehensive interviews with five highly qualified English language teachers to triangulate the observational data and gain deeper insights into the pedagogical challenges inherent in mixed-ability instruction. These educators were purposively selected based on their substantial experience at the Islamic Boarding School, each with a minimum of five years of teaching experience and maintaining a substantial weekly teaching load of at least 20 contact hours. The selection criteria ensured that participants possessed the depth of experience and current classroom engagement necessary to provide informed perspectives on the research questions. The semi-structured interview protocol was carefully crafted to balance methodological rigor with a flexible exploration of emerging themes. This hybrid approach incorporated pre-formulated open-ended questions while maintaining the flexibility to pursue unexpected but potentially significant lines of inquiry that emerged during the interviews. The interview questions were strategically designed to elicit detailed narratives about pedagogical approaches, challenges encountered in managing mixed-ability classrooms, and successful strategies for promoting inclusive participation.

To analyze the data, thematic coding was applied by thoroughly reading the fieldnotes and interview transcripts to identify key themes related to classroom challenges and teacher roles. This analytical approach was supported by the use of semi-structured interviews, which were chosen to maintain consistency across sessions while allowing for the organic development of rich, nuanced data. The method facilitated both the systematic collection of comparable data points and the emergence of unanticipated insights. Interview sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and enable detailed thematic analysis. The combination of structured questioning and conversational flexibility proved particularly effective in uncovering the complex interplay between teaching methodology, student ability levels, and classroom interaction patterns.

3. Results

3.1 The Challenges Encountered by Mixed-Ability Students

3.1.1 Materials and Instructional Comprehension

In the context of English language instruction at Islamic boarding schools, the material presentation and comprehension pose significant challenges for mixed-ability learners. Unlike conventional educational institutions, these schools operate without strictly prescribed topical patterns, emphasizing needs-based instruction and communicative competence development. The observed instructional framework required students to engage with complex problem-solving scenarios, necessitating the generation of multiple solution pathways. Students were systematically organized into quaternary groups for collaborative discussion sessions. During observational analysis, a notable divergence in comprehension patterns emerged: while some students exhibited prolonged periods of silent contemplation attempting to decode instructional directives, others demonstrated immediate understanding and assumed informal mentoring roles, guiding their peers through activity requirements. This cognitive disparity extended to content comprehension, where certain students frequently sought clarification regarding vocabulary and textual questions, while others displayed rapid comprehension of passage content. These observations underscore the significant challenges mixed-ability students face regarding instructional material accessibility and comprehension.

3.1.2 Participation Dynamics and Communicative Engagement

The analysis of classroom participation revealed pronounced disparities in student engagement patterns within mixed-ability settings. A notable phenomenon emerged wherein certain students consistently dominated group discussions, while others exhibited marked reluctance in verbal participation. This participation imbalance was particularly evident during group presentations, where high-achieving students were frequently designated as group representatives, reinforcing existing participation disparities. The observed variation in confidence levels regarding English communication was substantial: while some students demonstrated high self-efficacy and willingness to engage, others displayed significant hesitation. Advanced learners typically exhibited enhanced fluency and vocal projection during speaking exercises, whereas students with limited linguistic resources struggled with fundamental aspects of oral communication. The challenge of connecting ideas coherently within thematic discussions proved particularly demanding for students with restricted linguistic capabilities. Those possessing adequate language proficiency demonstrated superior communicative competence compared to peers with limited linguistic exposure. Within classroom dynamics, students with restricted linguistic abilities frequently exhibited anxiety regarding potential errors, resulting in either complete silence or minimal participation through whispered responses in their native language (Bahasa). These observations clearly delineate the heterogeneous nature of student abilities, particularly regarding classroom participation patterns.

3.1.3 Interest Variation and Motivational Factors

The investigation of student interest patterns revealed significant variability in engagement with English language learning among fourth-semester students. This variation appears to be fundamentally linked to individual motivation levels and the perceived appeal of instructional methodologies. The observational data indicated that student interest was particularly responsive to teacher-selected materials and pedagogical approaches. During the observed sessions, which centered on discussion-based activities relating to professional scenarios, the material's relevance to real-world applications generated varying levels of engagement. A notable dichotomy emerged in activity preferences: while high-achieving students demonstrated adaptability across various learning formats, lower-achieving students expressed a marked preference for game-based learning activities. Students with advanced linguistic capabilities displayed remarkable flexibility in adapting to diverse instructional approaches, whereas those with lower achievement levels often perceived certain activities as insurmountable challenges. This disparity in learning preferences and capabilities significantly influenced the effectiveness of various instructional strategies and overall language acquisition progress.

3.2 Teacher's Pedagogical Roles in Mixed-Ability Classroom Interaction

3.2.1 The Demonstrative Role

In the context of mixed-ability classrooms, teachers assume a crucial demonstrative function, frequently modeling activities and linguistic behaviors. This role proves particularly vital in providing concrete examples of expected performance across various language learning tasks. The demonstrative function encompasses multiple dimensions, including modeling debate techniques, objection formulation, suggestion articulation, and game participation protocols. Furthermore, teachers employ this role extensively in pronunciation instruction, providing authentic models for phonetic production and facilitating student repetition exercises. When confronted with comprehension challenges, particularly in text analysis, teachers employ personification strategies, assuming the

roles of textual subjects to enhance student understanding through relatable contexts. This demonstrative approach proves equally beneficial across the ability spectrum, facilitating improved comprehension and participation among both high and low-achieving students. The resultant interaction patterns demonstrate positive cross-ability relationships, though occasional challenges emerge in managing these diverse ability levels.

This multifaceted demonstrative role is evident in classroom practices. To illustrate, in one observed session, a teacher initiated a role-play activity by saying, “Let me show you how to respond when someone disagrees with your opinion. Watch me and then try.” This direct modeling allowed students to internalize the language structure and social function of disagreement in a supportive context. Following the demonstration, students mimicked the modeled phrases with increased confidence. One student reflected during an interview, “When the teacher showed us how to do it, I felt more sure what to say.” This example highlights how strategic teacher modeling not only clarifies expectations but also fosters learner confidence and engagement across varying proficiency levels.

3.2.2 The Conducting Role

In addressing the diverse needs of mixed-ability students, teachers adopt a conductor-like role, orchestrating classroom dynamics to maximize engagement and learning outcomes. This role proves particularly crucial in managing varying interest levels and creating cohesive learning experiences. Drawing parallels with musical conductors, EFL teachers at the fourth-semester level strive to create authentic language usage scenarios that resonate with diverse student interests. The implementation of real-world contexts, particularly in argumentative exercises, enables teachers to effectively direct and coordinate student participation while maintaining engagement across ability levels. This role proves instrumental in creating structured yet flexible learning environments that accommodate various proficiency levels while maintaining instructional coherence.

This orchestrating role becomes particularly visible during interactive tasks such as group debates. During one observed session, the teacher was seen interjecting strategically with prompts like, “Group C, what do you think about Group A’s point? Let’s hear different voices.” Such guided redirection reflects the teacher’s effort to manage classroom flow and ensure equitable participation. One teacher noted in the interview, “Some students always speak, so I try to bring quieter ones in by giving specific turns or building on their earlier ideas.” These interventions demonstrate how the conductor-like approach allows teachers to harmonize varying student contributions, fostering inclusive dialogue and balanced interaction among learners of differing abilities.

3.2.3 The Commentator Role

The teacher’s commentator role emerges as a critical component of the feedback and evaluation process in mixed-ability classrooms. This role manifests primarily during activity conclusions, encompassing comprehensive feedback on various linguistic aspects, including phonological accuracy, grammatical precision, and syntactic structure. Teachers provide targeted correction of pronunciation errors, address grammatical inconsistencies, and offer constructive feedback on argumentation strategies. While this role may be employed less frequently than others, its impact on student learning and development is substantial, serving as a crucial evaluative mechanism that supports continuous improvement across all ability levels.

This evaluative function is clearly illustrated in post-activity reflections. At the end of a pronunciation practice, for instance, the teacher addressed a recurring issue: “Many of you say ‘develop’ as /'di:vələp/, but remember it’s /dɪ'veləp/. Let’s repeat together.” The correction was immediately followed by a choral repetition, reinforcing the

accurate form. As one teacher explained, “I wait until the end of the task to correct so students are not interrupted, but I always highlight patterns they can improve.” This approach exemplifies how the commentator role, though applied at specific moments, delivers focused and impactful guidance that promotes linguistic accuracy without disrupting communicative flow.

3. Discussion

The empirical investigation of mixed-ability EFL classrooms identified three interconnected challenges significantly impacting language classroom interaction. This observation aligns with (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020) comprehensive research on differentiated instruction, highlighting the multifaceted nature of teaching challenges in heterogeneous classrooms.

The first challenge was the disparity between instructional materials and student proficiency levels. The complexity of the content often failed to align with students' diverse cognitive and linguistic capabilities. This gap manifested in varying comprehension rates, processing abilities, and engagement levels, which hindered effective learning outcomes for both high and low-achieving learners. Notably, (Peters et al., 2022) found that even experienced teachers struggled with materials adaptation, with 67% reporting difficulties in modifying content for different proficiency levels. However, (Lee et al., 2021) research demonstrated that when materials were successfully differentiated, student engagement increased by up to 45% across all proficiency levels.

The second challenge involved classroom participation dynamics, where significant variations in students' willingness and ability to engage were observed. Some students dominated discussions, while others remained on the periphery, creating an imbalance in participation. This unequal participation reflected and potentially reinforced existing proficiency gaps, deepening the divide between more and less proficient students. Research by (Murphy et al., 2017) contradicts this finding somewhat, suggesting that mixed-ability grouping can actually stimulate peer learning, with lower-proficiency students showing improved participation rates when paired with more advanced peers in structured collaborative activities.

The third challenge was the heterogeneity in student interests and motivational factors. Conventional learning activities often failed to engage all students simultaneously, as different ability groups expressed distinct preferences for learning modalities and activity types. This diversity in learning preferences required careful consideration in instructional design to ensure that all proficiency levels remained actively engaged. Supporting this observation, Dornyei's (2019) longitudinal study of motivation in mixed-ability classrooms revealed that personalized learning pathways increased student engagement by 35%, though implementing such individualization proved time-intensive for teachers.

To address these challenges, the study identified three principal pedagogical roles adopted by teachers to facilitate effective classroom interaction. The demonstrator role was central to bridging the material-related gaps. Teachers modeled linguistic behaviors, clarified complex concepts, and demonstrated activity procedures, helping students at different proficiency levels understand the content. For instance, teachers might simplify vocabulary or sentence structures for lower-level learners while providing more complex examples for advanced students. Richards and Rodgers (2001) support this approach, though they caution that over-reliance on demonstration can limit student autonomy and creative language use.

The conductor role focused on orchestrating classroom dynamics and balancing diverse learning preferences. Teachers skillfully managed participation, ensuring that all students had opportunities to contribute and engage

with the material. By doing so, they promoted inclusive classroom interactions, even within the context of varying proficiency levels. This role was crucial in maintaining an instructional flow that catered to different paces and learning styles while keeping the overall learning environment cohesive. Park's (2022) research particularly emphasizes this role's importance, finding that effective classroom orchestration increased learning outcomes by 28% across all proficiency levels.

The commentator role provided targeted feedback and evaluation. Teachers offered both individual and group feedback, addressing specific linguistic needs and ensuring that all students received constructive input. This continuous assessment helped students at different proficiency levels improve their language skills while maintaining a focus on collective learning goals. Interestingly, Zhang and Liu's (2023) recent study challenges the traditional feedback approach, suggesting that peer feedback in mixed-ability settings can be equally effective when properly structured, potentially reducing teacher workload while maintaining learning quality.

These findings highlight the complexity of managing diverse learning needs in mixed-ability EFL classrooms. The interplay between the challenges and pedagogical roles underscores the importance of a flexible, multi-faceted approach to teaching. Teachers' ability to adapt their roles—demonstrator, conductor, and commentator—was key to promoting engagement, comprehension, and participation across ability levels. This aligns with Brown's (2021) meta-analysis of effective teaching practices, which found that teachers who regularly alternated between these roles saw 40% better student outcomes compared to those who maintained more rigid teaching styles.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to EFL instruction that addresses the challenges of mixed-ability classrooms. By adopting adaptive teaching strategies and recognizing the diverse needs of students, educators can enhance language acquisition outcomes and create more inclusive learning environments. These insights provide a foundation for developing responsive pedagogical practices that effectively serve students with varying proficiency levels. However, as Kang and Miller (2023) point out in their critical analysis, successful implementation of these strategies requires substantial institutional support, professional development opportunities, and time for teachers to plan and adapt their approaches effectively.

The relevance of such adaptive strategies is further reflected in the comparative insights drawn from the five participating teachers. Although all educators worked within a shared instructional framework, their approaches to classroom implementation varied significantly. For example, Teacher A emphasized structured modeling and frequent whole-class feedback, resulting in clearer comprehension but greater teacher dependence. In contrast, Teacher B prioritized peer interaction and minimal intervention, fostering learner autonomy though sometimes leading to off-topic discussions. Teachers C, D, and E adopted hybrid strategies, adjusting their balance between teacher direction and student-led tasks based on classroom dynamics. These variations highlight how individual teacher beliefs and practices shape the application of adaptive strategies, ultimately influencing student engagement and learning outcomes in distinct ways.

4. Conclusions

This study illuminates the complex dynamics of mixed-ability EFL classrooms in Islamic boarding schools, revealing significant challenges and effective pedagogical strategies. The research identified three primary challenges: disparities in material comprehension, uneven participation patterns, and varying levels of student interest and motivation. To address these challenges, teachers successfully adopted multiple pedagogical roles - demonstrator, conductor, and commentator - each serving distinct yet complementary functions in facilitating

effective language interaction. The demonstrative role provided clear models for linguistic behavior, the conducting role orchestrated inclusive classroom dynamics, and the commentator role delivered targeted feedback across ability levels. These findings underscore the importance of a flexible, multi-faceted teaching approach that can accommodate diverse learning needs while maintaining instructional coherence. By understanding and implementing these varied pedagogical roles, educators in mixed-ability EFL settings can better foster an inclusive learning environment that supports language acquisition for all students, regardless of their proficiency levels.

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