Challenges English Language Teachers Faced in Teaching Mixed-ability Classes at Selected Secondary Schools in the Gamo Zone of SNNPRS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the challenges English language teachers faced in teaching MACs at selected secondary schools in the Gamo Zone of Southern Nations and Nationalities Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS). To address this objective, we adopted an exploratory case study design. We selected 65 EFL teachers through a systematic random sampling technique for the questionnaire. Besides, we selected five teachers for unstructured interviews purposively. To organize and analyze the qualitative data, we employed inductive and deductive approaches. The results revealed a wide range of challenges from teacher-related to materials and student-related. Therefore, we concluded that secondary school English language teachers have faced multiple challenges and internalized them and tried to see inward to themselves than externalizing the problems and making other bodies responsible.

Keywords: Mixed-ability classes (MACs), MACs challenges, teacher-related challenges, and student-related challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the various challenges teachers have been facing today is teaching mixed-ability classes. In mixed-ability classrooms (MACs), students vary in their levels of language competence, motivation for learning, needs, interest, and experiences (Chapman & King, 2003; Valentic, 2005). Some students are advanced that can understand instruction without difficulty. Other groups of students can hardly comprehend while there are grade-level students that fall somewhere in between these two extremes (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2005). Besides, there are motivated and interested students although there are demotivated and uninterested students to learn (Simanova, 2010). Moreover, teachers may face discipline problems in MACs when students feel discouraged, lose attention, are bored, or show troublesome behavior (Ur, 2005).

Moreover, it is challenging for teachers to provide material or activities that are challenging, motivating, and interesting to all levels of students in MACs (Simanova, 2010; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2010). The contents or activities of a lesson might be too easy for some while demanding for others (Mirani & Chunawala, 2015; Simanova, 2010; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2010). As well, textbooks are prepared at grade level and are stiff and only appropriate to some groups of students and are unfitting for other groups of students (Syathroh, Musthafa & Purnawarman, 2019; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2010). Also, obtaining and selecting appropriate materials and tasks suitable to the different levels of students in MACs is very challenging (Khadka, 2019; Ur, 2005). On top of this, lack of motivation and interest to learn (Simanova, 2010), poor English language proficiency of students (Valentic, 2005), and large class sizes and their time-consuming nature (Khadka, 2019; Loiacono & Allen, 2008; Simanova, 2010) have been some of the challenges teachers faced in MACs.

Furthermore, the lack of training in the skills and methodologies to deal with MACs (Butterworth, 2010; Kantor, 2011; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2010) and the lack of MAC teaching strategies (Morris, 2008) are some of the challenges teachers faced. Besides, the inability to adapt materials/tasks (Loiacono & Allen, 2008; Perera, 2010) to accommodate the different ability levels of students (Mathews, Aydinli & Horne, 2006; Morris, 2008) and failure to address advanced or struggling students (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015) are also worth mentioning challenging. When teachers fail to teach and address all levels of students, they teach to the average ignoring the advanced and struggling groups (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Reed, 2004). Teaching to the middle level disappoints struggling students and influences them to fall farther behind, while the advanced students remain unchallenged, and lose motivation to learn (Reed, 2004). Understanding

the situation and giving balanced attention to all the students might be a challenge for MACs teachers.

To the researchers' knowledge and online research, we could not obtain local studies related to the challenges English language teachers faced in teaching MACs in the context of selected secondary schools in the Gamo Zone, Ethiopia. Unless we identify the challenges teachers face in MACs, it is unlikely to plan data-driven remedial interventions (coping strategies) for in-service teachers. Besides, teacher education institutions may not revisit their curricula concerning MACs teaching pedagogy and prepare their pre-service trainees unless we provide them with MACs challenges as well. To this effect, exploring the challenges teachers face in MACs is crucial to think coping strategies. Therefore, this study explored the challenges English language teachers faced in teaching MACs at selected secondary schools in the Gamo Zone of Southern Nations Nationalities People Regional State (SNNPRS), Ethiopia.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study aimed to explore the challenges English language teachers faced in teaching MACs at selected secondary schools in the Gamo Zone of SNNPRS. To address this objective, we adopted an exploratory case study design. The case study design enhanced us to examine the challenges teachers faced in teaching MACs in their real context in the study area in 2023. Directed by the case study design, we employed open-ended items and interviews to collect in-depth data about the study phenomena. Among the various variants of the case study design, we assumed an exploratory case study because little is known about the study issue in the study context. Therefore, the design enhanced us to realize the case thoroughly.

2.2. Participants of the Study

We selected 65 EFL teachers to respond to the open-ended questionnaire items through a systematic random sampling technique. Besides, we selected five teachers for unstructured interviews purposively. We took the sample teachers for the interviews from novice, middle-level experience groups, and highly experienced groups.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

We employed open-ended questionnaire items and interviews to explore the challenges English language teachers faced in teaching MACs. The purpose of the open-ended items of the questionnaire was to elicit the challenges teachers faced while teaching MACs. The questionnaire had five subthemes which included: classroom management, teaching-learning, teaching materials/tasks, training-related, and students-related challenges. A follow-up unstructured interview was also employed. Its purpose was to elaborate and clarify the unclear findings of the open-ended questionnaire items. Based on the consent of the interviewees, we audio recorded and later transcribed the audio of the interviews verbatim.

2.4. Methods of Data Analysis

We code the data obtained through unstructured interviews and open-ended questionnaire items engaging a hybrid approach that combined inductive and deductive approaches. We analyzed the data we gained through open-ended questionnaire items with a deductive approach since the items were pre-set and coded derived from the objective of the study. The pre-codes included classroom management, teaching-learning, teaching materials/tasks, training-related, and students-related challenges teachers faced in teaching MAC. Similarly, we analyzed the interview data inductively because no prior codes were set.

Additionally, we used excerpts and direct quotes that reflected the beliefs and worldviews of the interviewees together with verbal descriptions to analyze the qualitative data. We compared the results we found from the inductive and deductive analyses for trustworthy conclusions (Braun & Clark, 2006; Riessman, 2008).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Open-ended items analysis on challenges teachers faced in addressing MACs.

The Table below summarized the qualitative data results obtained from open-ended questionnaire items related to challenges teachers faced in addressing MACs.

Challenges	Respondents comment
Class management related	• Large class size • Vast learning differences among students made MAC difficult to handle • Discipline issues
Teaching-learning related	• Being passive and unwilling to participate in learning • The incapability of keeping a noticeable learning pace among top and struggling students • The inability of addressing different ability students through providing different levels and types of tasks • Poor English language competence of the students -a barrier to teaching-learning
Materials/tasks related	• Shortage of textbooks • Lack of teacher guides
Training related	• Inadequacy of training on adapting materials/tasks for mixed-ability classes • Lack of training related to mixed-ability teaching
Students related	• Poor English language competence of the students • Lack of learning motivation and interest • The wide learning gaps among students • Poor participation due to fear of making mistakes • Failure to bring textbooks during classes

We summarized themes we obtained from the open-ended questionnaire items on the challenges they faced while teaching MACs in Table above. The participant teachers listed several challenges they faced in five major themes. The themes are classroom management, teaching and learning related, teaching material/tasks, training-related, and students-related challenges. Accordingly, large class sizes and vast learning differences among students made MACs management challenging. Whereas teachers' incapability of keeping a noticeable learning pace among advanced and struggling students and their inability of addressing different ability students through providing different levels and types of tasks are the major challenges related to the teaching-learning of MACs. Besides, poor English language competence of the students is also among teaching and learning-related challenges. Moreover, teachers' inadequate training in MACs teaching and incapability of adapting materials/tasks for MACs are also the major challenges teachers faced.

Poor English language competence, lack of learning motivation and interest to attend lessons are critical student-related challenges teachers faced in teaching MACs. As well, wide learning gaps among students, low-class participation, and poor English language competence are also among the challenges teachers faced in MACs. Moreover, failure to bring textbooks during classes is the other challenge as well.

Therefore, we concluded that secondary school English language teachers internalized the challenges they faced. They attempted to see inward to themselves than externalizing and making other bodies responsible.

3.2. Interview Data Analysis on Challenges Teachers Faced in Teaching MAC

Addressing MAC is a very demanding and challenging task that teachers face these days. Interview data analysis also pins pointed out the complex challenges English language teachers faced in teaching MAC. We categorized the challenges into five domains which included classroom management, teaching-learning, teaching materials/tasks, training-related and students-related. As to classroom management-related domains, the interviewees stated large class sizes and their time-consuming nature, poor English competence of students, and wide language proficiency gap among them as challenges they faced. One of the interviewees stated the challenges faced in the attempt to address MAC as follows:

> *It is very difficult to manage and assist the different ability students that need support and attention in large mixed-ability classes. It is puzzling to address, support, and monitor large mixed-ability classes. Besides, attempting large MAC is time-consuming since we are pressured to cover the broad syllabus contents (T1).*

Besides, one (T4) of the interviewees underlined the poor English competence of students and the wide language proficiency gap among them as challenges and uttered as follows:

> *There is a wide language proficiency gap among the students. We cannot address and support all levels of students. As a result, unsupported groups of students will lag while unchallenged groups lose motivation to learn, disengage and get boredom and be the cause of discipline and make the classroom unmanageable.*

The other issue teachers faced in teaching MAC is related to teaching-learning. One of the challenges is that the teachers could not address the three levels of students. The interviewees did

not have a specific group to which they focus in addressing their instruction, and one of them stated:

> *My lessons focus on the average students who meet the grade level expectations. However, it is difficult to ignore the rest students. Thus, it is essential to involve all levels of students (T3).*

Although teacher 3 perceived the inclusion of all levels of students in the teaching difficult task, the teacher stated it is impossible to ignore the rest. Moreover, the teacher underlined he practically tends to focus on the average (grade level) students with the exclusion of the rest two groups. In contrast, teacher 2 stated his lessons focus on the average and the struggling group as these two groups need more support, ignoring the advanced group. Teacher 1 as well mentioned he focuses on the struggling group and stated it as follows:

> *My lessons focus on struggling groups because they do slower than others. I need to focus on struggling groups to bring change to them as this group needs support not to lag and widen achievement gaps and inequity.*

Teacher 5 also highlighted her classes may not address all groups of students due to various contextual factors that might have affected addressing MACs. Among constraints for not being able to address all levels of the students, she stated the wide language proficiency gap and varied learning pace among the students, and the inability of adapting the lessons and tasks to all levels of students have been articulated. As a result, she stressed that her lessons may not fit all levels of students which, in turn, may adversely affect the teaching-learning process.

Concerning teaching materials/tasks and students related challenges teachers face in teaching MACs, the teachers have offered their opinions. Shortage of textbooks, teacher guides, and scarcities of additional supporting teaching materials have been mentioned as major problems. Besides, the incapability of modifying the instruction and tasks for all levels of students has been mentioned as a challenge in teaching MACs. Particularly, teacher 5 stated the situation as follows:

> *Adapting the lessons and tasks to all levels of students seems to be beyond my capability. Consequently, the lessons may not fit all levels of students, which in turn, may adversely affect the teaching-learning process.*

Similarly, Poor English language competence of the students (T5), failure to bring their textbooks on the part of the students (T2 & T4), and wide gap in the proficiency of the students were mentioned as student-related challenges. On the adverse effect of proficiency gap among students of the same grade level in MACs, teacher 3 emphasized the condition and stated how it affected quality and equity learning as follows:

> *Ensuring quality and equity in mixed-ability classes is the most challenging issue now a day. Sometimes it is unbelievable to assume how some students have been promoted to the grade level they are in now without having the skills required of them. We observe a mismatch between the knowledge and skills required of them at their grade levels vis-à-vis their grade level expectation. It is hard to even think about equity and quality let alone ensure them.*

Concerning the English language teachers' educational training in handling MACs, the interviewees unanimously responded that they have not taken adequate training on the teaching strategies and handling mechanisms of large MACs in both pre-service and in-service training. Consequently, they revealed teaching large mixed-ability classes has become a challenge to them.

3.3. Discussion

Concerning the challenges English language teachers faced in teaching MACs, major themes emerged from the open-ended items and interview data analysis. The themes included classroom management related, teaching-learning (pedagogical) related, teaching material/tasks related, training, and students related challenges. Regarding classroom management-related challenges, large class sizes and their time-consuming nature, and students' poor English competence and a wide language proficiency gap among them have been stated as major domains. Early works acknowledge teachers face large class sizes and their time-consuming nature (Khadka, 2019; Loiacono & Allen, 2008; Simanova, 2010), poor English competence, and a wide language proficiency gap among students (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2005; Syathroh, Musthafa & Purnawarman, 2019; Valentic, 2005) in MAC. Understanding and paying equal attention to all the students might be a challenge for MACs teachers. Consequently, teachers face discipline problems and difficulty in managing MACs.

The other challenge teachers faced is related to teaching-learning in MACs. The results obtained from both the open-ended items and interviews showed teachers are unclear and indecisive about

the group of students to which they should focus in teaching MACs. As a result, some of the teachers mentioned they teach to the grade level while others target struggling or advanced students. Besides, the results indicated the teachers could not address all groups of students in MACs due to various factors which included a wide language proficiency gap and varied learning paces among students, the inability of adapting the lessons and tasks to all levels of students, and poor English language competence of the students.

Although previous studies indicated it is difficult to know all students, and every difference of them and devote to address all equally (Simanova, 2010; Syathroh, Musthafa & Purnawarman, 2019; Ur, 2005), it may not be rational to teach focusing on one group of students. If the teachers plan lessons and teach to the middle on average students' level ignoring the majority of low achievers and/or some high achievers, the instructions failed to address the two groups. On the other hand, 'teaching to the lower level of a class perpetuates the problem of low achievement, along with boredom and disengagement on the part of the middle and high-end learners. Teaching to the middle level causes the less-prepared students to struggle and fall farther behind, while the better-prepared students, who remain unchallenged, lose their motivation to learn (Reed, 2004). Teaching to the high end also seems untenable, given the probable struggle and likely disengagement by less-prepared students' (Reed, 2004, p.79). Although it is difficult to be certain that all students are learning effectively in MAC (Ur, 2005), ignoring and failing to address one or two of the groups could not be acceptable.

Moreover, a shortage of textbooks and teacher guides and inadequacies of supporting teaching materials have been found as major teaching materials/tasks-related challenges teachers faced in teaching MACs. Let alone shortage of textbooks, even the availability of textbooks in abundance may not be helpful to all levels of students as they are rigid and only fit to certain kinds of students and are unsuitability for different proficiency levels of students (Syathroh, Musthafa & Purnawarman, 2019; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2010). Besides, getting appropriate materials (Khadka, 2019; Ur, 2005) and selecting appropriate tasks and materials (Khadka, 2019) which fit the different levels of students is very challenging.

Along with this, inadequate training at both pre-service and in-service levels on MACs and teaching strategies to address all levels of students was one of the major challenges teachers voiced in teaching large MACs. Besides, lack of training on adapting materials/tasks to the different ability levels of students was also found as a challenge faced in teaching MAC. Studies

confirm the findings of the current study that teachers have not been equipped with the required skills and methodologies to deal with mixed-ability students (Butterworth, 2010; Kantor, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2010) in general. Teachers had no adequate training on how to accommodate the different ability levels students (Mathews, Aydinli & Horne, 2006; Morris, 2008), adapt materials/tasks (Perera, 2010), and apply various strategies (Morris, 2008) to cope with mixed ability classes. However, imposing the same levels of materials/tasks to all levels of students may not fit all, engage and challenge all equitably and effectively (Khadka, 2019).

Moreover, poor English language competence of the students, lack of motivation to learn and interest to attend the lessons, and failure to bring textbooks during classes on the part of the students were some of the student-related challenges teachers faced in teaching MAC. Early studies also corroborated these findings that lack of motivation and interest to learn (Simanova, 2010), and poor English language proficiency of students (Valentic, 2005) have been found challenges teachers faced in MAC. Besides, failure to bring textbooks to classrooms during lessons on the part of students has been discovered as a challenge as well.

Therefore, it seems palpable to conclude that secondary school English language teachers have internalized many of the challenges and attempted to see inward to themselves than externalizing the problems and making other bodies responsible. Understanding the problems and internalizing them could be an impetus and contribute to seeking solutions.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Conclusion

Classroom management related, teaching-learning (pedagogical) related, teaching material/tasks related, training, and students related challenges are unveiled as major challenges teachers faced in addressing MAC. Accordingly, we discovered the large class size and its time-consuming nature, students' poor English competence and a wide language proficiency gap among students are some concerning classroom management-related challenges. Shortage of textbooks and teacher guides and inadequacies of supporting teaching materials are materials/tasks-related challenges teachers faced in addressing MAC. Besides, we concluded teachers lack clarity concerning the groups to which their instruction should focus. On top of this, the incapability of addressing all groups of students and the inability of adapting

the lessons and tasks to all levels of students have been found challenges in addressing MAC that originated from inadequate training of teachers on MAC and its teaching strategies and adapting materials/tasks to address all levels of students as challenges teachers faced in teaching MAC. In other words, we found teachers have clear pedagogical gaps in teaching MAC although there are affecting factors from the side of the students too.

Moreover, poor English language competence of the students, wide language proficiency gap and varied learning pace among students, lack of motivation to learn and interest to attend the lessons, and failure to bring textbooks during classes on the part of the students have been discovered as a student related challenges teachers faced in teaching MAC.

Therefore, it seems palpable to conclude that secondary school English language teachers have internalized many of the challenges and attempted to see inward to themselves than externalizing the problems and making other bodies responsible. Understanding the problems and internalizing them could contribute to solutions seeking.

4.2. Recommendations

The study also concluded that teachers could not implement MAC teaching strategies frequently due to classroom management-related, teaching-learning (pedagogical), teaching material/tasks, training-related, and students-related challenges. Therefore, concerned education and teacher education institutions shall provide teachers with possible MACs coping strategies to alleviate the problems and ensure equity to access resources and quality learning for students of all levels of English language proficiency regardless of their differences. Because MAC instruction should address the wide array of ability levels while maintaining quality and equity of learning (Valiande & Koutselini, 2008). Besides, MAC instruction ought to narrow down the prevalent achievement gap among students, challenge all students appropriately, and enable them to achieve better (Hobson, 2004; Koeze, 2007).

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