

## MIXED-ENGLISH PROFICIENCY CLASS: A REVIEW ON ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this paper is to illuminate some issues regarding mixed-English proficiency classes for English Language Teaching in the context of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The existing literatures reveals that there are pros and contras of this class in the forms of ways in grouping the students which lead to students' different learning styles and interest, and teachers' teaching and learning materials and methodology. Indeed, this English heterogeneous type of class brings potential risks for the students' achievement. This paper also proposes three most common Differentiated Instruction strategies to engage mixed-English students in EFL teaching and learning processes more effectively.

**Keywords:** mixed-English proficiency, mixed-ability, heterogeneous class, differentiated instruction

The most common problem in teaching English as a target language at schools is that in one class consist of the learners with mixed-English proficiency. The requirement approach for English learners as the students in the schools often resulted in a very mixed-English proficiency students in the classes (Chen, 2015).The students might have come from previous different schools with various levels of English abilities, ranging from the lowest beginner level to the highest advance one. The low-proficiency level learners are labeled as slow, struggling, or weak learners as they need more time to comprehend the English learning materials; meanwhile, their counterpart is regarded as fast, quick, advanced, or strong learners due to their speed in completing the given tasks. Experts believe that the existed mixed-ability or mixed-proficiency in an English Language Teaching (ELT) class, some experts currently call *mixed-ability* or *mixed-proficiency* as *heterogeneous* class, is happened because the students as the English learners have different contexts in their learning styles, intelligence, background, and English learning experience and knowledge (Bremner, 2008; Harris & Snow, 2004; Londres, 2017; Marcia, 2009; Prema, 2016; Tomlinson, 2001; Ur, 2005). Hence, due to the different names of this English class, the terms *mixed-proficiency*, *mixed-ability* and *heterogeneous* is used interchangeably in this article.

Having such various English proficiencies in one class influences the students' learning processes as well. Some students might have already secured

with A grade because they are able to use English well in all language skills, while others struggle even to adapt the very basic English grammar (Alastair 2014; Hammer, 1998; Scrivener, 2005). Teachers also have very pedagogic challenges in teaching and developing proficiency for their mixed-English proficiencies students in one class. They face difficulties in teaching the English as the target language because they need to deal with the students' various proficiencies. In one hand, they have to deal with various and different needs of their students; in other hand, they have to provide equality and equity in teaching and learning processes to all students (Bremner, 2008; Bowler & Parminter, 2002; Hallam, Rogers, & Ireson, 2008; Harmer, 1998; Harris & Snow, 2004; Prema, 2016; Scrivener, 2005; Van Der Veer, 2007). Therefore, this paper is trying to overview some references regarding the issues in mixed-English proficiencies class including challenges to be dealt with as well as the strategies to overcome the difficulties in teaching a mixed-English proficiency class.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section explores some related literatures regarding mixed-English proficiency class issues focusing on the definition, pros and cons on mixed-English proficiency class, challenges in handling the class, and potential risks of being mixed proficiency.

### ***Mixed-English Proficiency***

The term mixed-proficiency has been defined by some scholars in different times. An earlier definition in 1983 was proposed by Bailey and Bridges (1983). They stated so-called a *mixed-ability* class as a group of students in which they reflects their full ability ranges in learning on a basis of equal respect for every student as an individual. It emphasizes on the students social integration and cohesion, mutual understanding and respect, as well as toleration and cooperation in a class. Later, in the 1990s, Ainslie (1994); Clark (1992); Cohen, (1994); Hallam, & Toutounji, (1996); Harmer (1998); Harlen & Malcolm (1997) in their studies defined that a mixed-ability class consisted of any students with their various abilities, ranging from beginner, elementary, intermediate, and advance, which related to their motivation and needs in learning. Those gathered students study subjects together in one class as an obligation or compulsory.

In 2000s, some scholars have more complex definition on the term of *mixed-ability*. Ireson & Hallam (2001) and McKeown (2004) viewed a mixed-ability class as not only a class with a group of learners with subset proficiency from beginner to advance levels but also various learning problems.

Additionally, Ur (2005) and Tomlinson (2001) in their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) researches argued that the term *mixed-ability* does not involve all students' aspects in class instead of their being capable or disable. However, Ur, then, referred a mixed-English ability class as a *heterogeneous* class with beginner, intermediate, and advance learners who learn a target language in regard to their levels of motivation, age, and learning styles. In another EFL research, Scrivener (2005:116) also said that, "*It [a heterogeneous class] is a class of learners in which the most important differences among them is their level of performance in the target language*". Other scholars, namely: Xanthou and Pavlou (2008:1) and Marcia (2009) also defined it in similar way but with different focus. Xanthou and Pavlou defined it as a way in gathering students of high, medium, and low abilities in one class which focused on providing an access to more opportunities in learning English. Meanwhile, Marcia defined mixed-ability condition as a delicate situation in an English class where the teachers need to focus on all aspects of the students' learning levels including the needs of teaching approaches and learning activities.

Recent scholars like Alastair (2014); Blaz, (2015); Chen (2015); Prema (2016) and Londres (2017) see a heterogeneous class as a class that consists of learners with different kinds of English competencies level from one another. Such class has an asset for the teachers to design and develop English teaching materials and pedagogies more creatively so that the students with different levels of English proficiency have equal value. In fact, the existing heterogeneous classes for English and other subjects have lead the schools to create a democracy in the ways of involving and giving all students with different levels of learning opportunity, to learn and develop their education.

### ***Pros and Contras***

Interestingly, some evidences have shown that scholars take their stands on the existing condition of teaching English as a target language in consequence of the learners' various proficiencies. Some of them favor the condition as a medium for teachers of English pedagogy improvement and students' academic achievement. On the contrary, some uttered it as a yelp which burdens the processes of ELT in the class both for the teachers and the students.

### ***Pros***

Brailey and Bridges (1983) in their book mention an old but pertinent concept of the history of mixed-ability grouping. They assumed it as a very helpful approach for having participation of less able students in a streaming. In this way, the learners learn how to tolerate others' level of proficiencies in learning

as well as show their mutual respect. In line with Brailey and Bridges, in their articles, Chen (2015), Xanthou & Pavlou (2008), and Marcia (2009) favor this approach as it provides less able students more opportunities to be assisted by other more able students in learning, which in turn, will advantage the less ability students' achievement and sharpen the more students' skills. They believe that the condition of various abilities in one class provides collaborative learning activities to develop students' language skills. Furthermore, Ur (2005) in his book also points out two advantages of a mixed-ability class: (1) students' interaction in class facilitates their knowledge, interest and varied opinion. It also increases their knowledge and respects to others; and (2) there will be peer-teaching among students as more able students will assist their less able counterparts.

Another group of scholars also sees this class providing benefits for the ELT teachers. According to Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; and Wallstrom, 2012, the condition of mixed-English competencies sharpens the teachers' skills in designing teaching and learning material as well as the strategies to apply it in the class. However, there are some contrasts re the above pros' opinion.

#### *Contras*

One contra opinion came from Londres (2017). She revealed in her study that a heterogeneous class was a hindrance for more able students to develop their potentials as it was difficult for them to focus attention in learning. This happened because the more able learners have to assist their less able counterparts during the learning processes. Other researchers i.e., Hallam (2002), Harlen & Malcolm (1997), Ireson & Hallam (2001), Marcia (2009), and Sukhmandan & Lee (1998) argued that labeling the students with levels of their English proficiency undermines their confidence in learning. It spreads negative effects on the personal and social outcomes for particular groups of learners, especially the slow learners.

This condition drives the teachers' opinion too. Summarized from Bernabas (2011), Hubbard (1983), and Kwie (2017), it is not easy to handle a mixed-English class because the mindset required is different. The teachers must comprehend various students' needs in learning the target language with various proficiencies. They have to really understand the topics and the concept strategies in teaching those topics. Moreover, producing various or graded teaching and learning materials is very demanding on energy, budget and time in order to accommodate various English proficiency levels.

Having the information of the pros and the contras above, the focus is about grouping the students based on their English proficiencies in learning processes. The *pros* assume that grouping the students *appropriately* could

build the students' self-esteem in learning English. It also alleviates their motivation in learning English which brings achievement and improvement in learning and using the target language. However, the *contras* emphasizes that grouping the students *inappropriately* could do more harm than good. Labeling them with *primary elementary, intermediate, or advance* could demotivate slow learners for being as nerdy or dumb which is resulted less confident and less secure for them to study in one class with their superior counterparts. Additionally, English proficiencies grouping is costly and dally for teachers to design various learning material and learning strategies. The Table 1 below is developed to classify the pros and contras which are summarized from the references in pros and cons sections above.

**Table 1. Pros and Contras in Mixed-English Proficiency Class**

Pros	Contras
• More participation from less able students	• Demotivation for less able students
• Learning collaboration among students	• Learning isolation among students
• Sharpening learning skills of more able students	• Splitting learning focus of more able students
• Increasing respects among students	• Undermining confidence among students
• Increasing teacher creativity in designing teaching material	• Wasting more time and budget in preparing teaching materials
• More various and creative teaching strategies and approaches	• Demanding in looking for appropriate teaching strategies or approaches

***Challenges in Teaching a Mixed-English Proficiency Class***

Teaching an English class with various levels of English proficiency has created some challenges. The following section illuminates some literatures re the most common challenges in teaching a mixed-English proficiency class, which followed by the potential risks of such class.

***Different Learning Styles***

Learning styles are defined as students' preferred strategies in learning. Regarding students' learning styles in learning English as a target language, Hammer (1998) and Nunan (1998) defines it as learners' mental process in the ways for the learners to learn and to use English as their target language, either as a second or a foreign language. Students of a mixed-ability class, obviously,

have various learning styles which related to their English proficiencies. English proficiency varies the learners' preferences and learning styles while it is difficult for teachers to know about each student preferences and to follow each of them during the class.

However, it is essential to monitor all the students' learning activities in the class. To assist the students to their own preferred strategies in learning; teachers must expose the students to a numbers of different ways in learning the target language, so that students can be familiar and choose the appropriate strategies for them (Bremner, 2008; Harris & Snow, 2004; and Londre, 2017). Hence, teachers need to individualize the English learning material in order to cater students' needs of their effective learning. The students' needs of effective learning style have to be adjusted to the material so that they can do the task in using their learning style. Indeed, teacher who could not cater all different learning styles and strategy preferences could cause learners' dissatisfaction and failure in learning (Blaz, 2015; Fisher, 2001; Nunan, 1998; Tomlinson, 2001; Ur, 2005).

#### *Teaching and Learning Material*

Creating teaching and learning EFL materials to encourage and challenge both less and more able students in order to keep them participating in the class is very challenging. Firstly, these materials must be able to stimulate the less able students to work their cognitive. Whereas the materials must develop the able students' intellectual forward as well as avoid the boredom because they have to wait their less able counterparts finishing the same given tasks. Both less and more able students must lead to the new learning experiences and discoveries in English (Alastair, 2014; Van Der Veer, 2007:84).

Secondly, it is very time consuming as teachers need more time to prepare various different activities. Teachers must be able to facilitate fairly all students learning processes, not the need of an English proficiency level in class. The material for a mixed-ability class needs to be planned well because it needs to address both learners' ability to perform the tasks and their potential in learning. It is not what the teachers teach but what the learners learn (Prema, 2016; Scrivener, 2005; Tomlinson, 1992).

Finally, providing the English learning materials for various abilities required teachers' great creativity. This is to ensure all students in the class busy and get challenged in developing their language skills. Teachers can adapt and adopt the material from any sources including internet and authentic ones to get the students participate more in ELT processes. More interesting learning materials increases students discipline in learning because when students show their discipline problems in learning, they are associated with boredom in

learning (Londre, 2016; Ur, 2005). However, it is suggested that teachers need to prepare extra activities of the original lesson in order to avoid boredom for those who might have completed earlier, or mentioned as “do different tasks with the same material” (Hammer, 1998, p.127).

#### *Teaching and Learning Methodology*

The teaching methodology in this type of class requires a wide range of strategies in order to accommodate the different learning styles of the students. Some ELT teaching experts argued that teacher must apply various teaching and learning methods to assist the students in gaining the lessons goals (Blaz, 2016; Cohen, 1994; Lewis et al., 2012).

Having a mixed-English proficiency class, the teachers must be able to engage and motivate all students equally because more able students will profit less from the class if they do not get stimulated and challenged to the lessons. In teaching this group, teacher must assist them to develop their intellectual level by giving them tasks above their intellectual level while not forgetting the less able ones (Bremner, 2008; Hallam, et.al., 2008; Harris & Snow, 2004: 2; Svard, 2006; Van Der Veer, 2007:81). It seems that the teachers' role in teaching mixed-ability EFL class cannot be underestimated, because these pedagogues have to deal with various intellectual levels in class as well as enhance every individual's confidence in learning (Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Harlen & Malcolm, 1997; Margo, 2006; Wallstrom, 2012).

It was found out that some teachers might teach in average level way as they do not have time to prepare various teaching and learning material. Hence, mixed-ability grouping is good for students if the teachers could manage the activities well; in fact, it is not an easy approach to do (Dimas & Castellanos, 2014; Hallam & Ireson, 2005; Harlen & Malcolm, 1997; Londre, 2016).

#### *Learners' Interest and Participation*

Giving same EFL learning material impacts on both strong and slow learners' motivation in learning. For strong learners, doing tasks below their intellectual level put them in unaffordable learning. This situation puts them in boredom and lack of interest to the lessons. As the results, they might make compensation to kill their boredom. This is what Van Der Veer (2007:79) said, “*The instruction that is crucial for their chronological age is simply too easy as their mental age is higher than the average*”. They are not motivated to try harder because they believe they have all done to get an A at the end of the semester. They take it for granted as they believe they already have good English proficiency.

Nevertheless, slow students are hindered from developing their abilities as their teachers do not push their potential with appropriate learning strategies.



In fact, teachers need to keep attention to all students undividedly because some of them need more assistance to meet the goals of the EFL lessons. It is teachers' responsibility to motivate their students in learning, since motivation and achievement are strongly related. Those who are unable to push their students' potential in learning will cause the diminishing of the ability of the students to reach their outmost potential (Anitha, 2018; Baker, 2002; Bremner, 2008; Clark, 1992; Lewis et al., 2012; Londres, 2017; Svard, 2006; Ur, 2005; and Wallstrom, 2012).

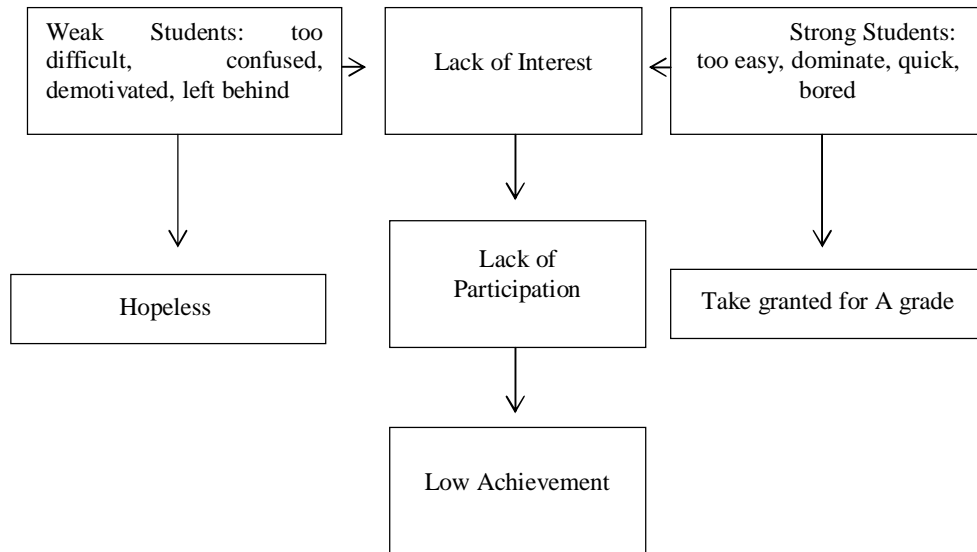
***Risks of a Mixed-English Proficiency Class***

A mixed-English proficiency class without proper management from an ELT teacher could raise a potential risk in the form of students' low achievement. The theory came from Kelly (1974) who mentioned that students of all ages and abilities must be managed appropriately for their achievement. Later, regarding ELT, Ainslei (1994) added that a mismanaged an English proficiency heterogeneous class reflects to a poor class atmosphere where the teachers are unable to provide a positive and relaxed atmosphere for English learning for their students. Then, Wright (2005) also supported this potential risk theory by claiming that classroom atmosphere and teacher management have a strong relation with students' achievement. Creating a good atmosphere by managing the students with mixed-English abilities in an ELT class promotes their English achievement.

Hence, mismanaging the members of this heterogeneous class potentially creates the triggers for low English achievement. Some scholars inform the triggers as follow. According to Ainslei (1994), Alastair (2014), Anitha (2018), Baker (2002), Blaz (2016), Bremner (2008), Clark (1992), Der Veer (2007), Hallam, et.al., (2008), Harris & Snow (2004), Lewis et al. (2012), Londres (2017), Svard, (2006), Ur (2005), Wallstrom (2012), and Wright (2005) that less able or weak English learners who have difficult learning materials will lead them to confusing in understanding the material. Then, they feel demotivated as they left behind in completing the tasks. In contrast, more able or strong learners, who have the same material with their counterparts, will find the learning material is very easy for them. As weak students need more time to complete the tasks, the strong ones will complete the tasks very quick and dominate the discussion. However, having much spare time after completing the task, they start getting bored of the learning processes in class.



Obviously, both weak and strong learners will lack of interest and participation to their EFL class which affect their achievement. The weak learners will be hopeless while the strong ones feel secure during their English class. Both conditions will lead to indiscipline in their learning processes which, in turn, cause low achievement. Figure 1 below is developed to show how the risk emerges from the triggers.



**Figure 1. Diagram of Potential Risk of a Mixed-English Proficiency Class**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Although a mixed-English proficiency class is seen as a challenging class by some scholars, indeed, other scholar proposed *differentiated instruction* as a way to overcome the challenges. Blaz (2015); Pospisilova (2008); and Tomlinson (2001) in their books proposed a teaching methodology called *differentiated instruction* in which it equipped the teacher with a wide range of teaching strategies in handling an EFL mixed-ability class. It is done in order to carter the needs of students with different learning styles. Following the previous mentioned researchers, Londre (2016: 23) claimed this methodology as *varying instruction or customized lessons*. She described it as an approach to challenge the students mind through interesting activities which lead to the enhancement of their learning styles.

In line with Londre's opinion, here are three steps as proposed by Blaz (2015:3) in order to make this approach work well:

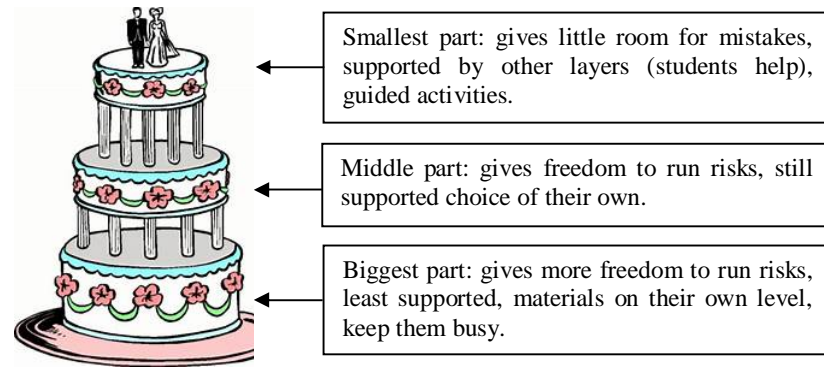
1. Teachers must identify the differences of learning styles among the students.
2. Teachers make adjustment according to what students will benefit most.
3. Teachers facilitate the various learning styles in the class.

In the application, the *differentiated instruction* is implemented into some strategies in teaching EFL. The following three strategies (Tiered Tasks, Collaborative Work, and Compulsory plus Optional Tasks) can be adapted as practical help to engage students in an English heterogeneous class to any teaching and learning situation.

#### ***Tiered Tasks***

The most well known strategy based on Differentiated Instruction was developed by Bowler and Parminter (2002) called *Tiered Tasks* was proposed to be adapted in a mixed-English proficiency class. The purpose is to check learners' English proficiency on a reading comprehension passage. Later on, Bremner (2008) and Marcia (2009) imaged the activities order in this strategy into three tiers which supported by pillars, just resembled like a wedding cake. The bottom tier, the biggest part and without any pillars, provides learners with various choices of activities for strong learners to avoid the boredom. Students in this level need no/less their teachers' help in doing the activities. The middle tier, smaller than the first one and supported by pillars, provides both limited choices and guided activities. In this level, middle learners have some support in doing their choice activities as they may answer more than one correct answer. The smallest and highest tier, supported by pillars, is provided to weaker learners in which they have guided activities with a lot of assistance from their teachers.

Figure 2 below is intended to give more details of imagination how Tiered Tasks resemble to a wedding cake order which is adopted from Bremmer (2008) and Marcia (2009).



**Figure 2. Image of Wedding Cake to Resemble Tiered Tasks**

**PROCEDURES:** Teachers provide three activities ranging to strong till weak learners. Learners are given the suitable activities in accord to their English proficiency level. The chosen tasks indicate the amount of teachers' help they need without knowing the levels of difficulty. Then the teachers distributed the learning materials to every tier. Once the learners have completed the tasks, teachers will provide feedback on their work. However, weak learners can use their logic in answering the questions.

***Collaborative Group Work***

*Collaborative Group Work* is a strategy proposed by Bremner (2008) and Marcia (2009) in which the purpose is to work with certain grammars rules in a writing subject. In this strategy, all learners have the same opportunity to contribute their thoughts through writing. The good thing is that weak learners are not exposed to their mistakes during learning processes because nobody knows who has written the previous sentence(s). Learners' contribution to the composition will foster not only their interest in writing but also producing good grammar which in turn enhance their language learning.

**PROCEDURES:** Teachers distribute a blank paper to each student and they write a single sentence in a certain grammar. For example, the theme is about *Last Weekend* and they have to write the sentence in *The Past Simple Tense* or *The Past Perfect Simple Tense*. The teacher takes the paper, jumble them, and distribute them to different learners. Then some learners are asked to

read the sentence they had in the paper. The teachers check the grammar as the feedback to the sentence had read; then all learners add one sentence to continue the previous sentence on the paper they have now. This cycle is stopped after repeating some times. At the end, there will be a story develop on each paper.

***Compulsory + Optional Tasks***

*Compulsory + Optional Tasks* were proposed by Chen (2015) and Ur (2005) in order to provide all learners with the most essential thing in teaching learning processes: a sense of achievement. This strategy is suitable for reading subjects because its purpose is to introduce some new lexical items in a reading passage while sharpening the learners' reading skills via a more flexible heterogeneous activity. This strategy is beneficial in two points for mixed-English proficiency class. First, the flexibility to answer the chosen numbers of compulsory questions in the reading passage will not lead the weak learners being held up in the group instead they will feel the sense of achievement. Second, the optional tasks for stronger learners will not make them being delayed in completing the tasks, instead they will keep busy all the time in the class.

PROCEDURES: All students in groups discuss the topic of the reading which they will have based on warm-up questions provided by teachers. Learners have to report the results of their group discussion in class so that they can have feedback from the teachers and other friends from different groups. After this warm-up activity, teachers distributed a reading passage with a set of questions in it. Learners may choose some questions from all provided questions to be answered within a set time. They may answer other questions if they have time. The answers will be discussed in class to have feedback later on.

**CONCLUSION**

The review presented in this paper confirms that besides its pros and cons which caused some issues, a mixed-English proficiency class in EFL context also has its possibility to be dealt with. Even if the English teachers face some challenges; it is worthy applying more heterogeneous activities in the class through suggested *differentiated instruction* strategies like Tiered Tasks, Collaborative Work, and Compulsory plus Optional. By applying these strategies, the teachers are to encourage the students as the target language learners to activate their language skills and knowledge.

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