

Challenges Facing EFL Teachers in Mixed Ability Classes and Strategies Used to Overcome Them

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the challenges faced by EFL teachers in grade five mixed-ability classes. It also aimed at investigating the strategies that teachers use in order to alleviate and overcome those challenges. There were 170 participants in this study. The participants answered a questionnaire to elicit the common challenges they faced and the strategies they followed. The results showed that EFL teachers in Oman face different challenges in mixed-ability classes and they apply limited strategies to overcome them. Some recommendations for EFL teachers and policy makers are provided in addition to recommendations for further studies.

Keywords: *mixed ability classes; EFL teachers; challenges; strategies*

1. Introduction and Literature Review

Mixed-ability classes refer to classes where students differ in their achievement, participation and their readiness to learn the foreign language. Educators give different explanations and definitions for mixed-ability classes. Some define them as synonymous with multi-level or heterogeneous classes where students differ clearly in the level and achievement. Bremner (2008) pointed out that mixed-ability classes do not just contain students with different abilities, but also students with a range of learning styles and preferences.

Mixed ability classes refer to classes which learners have clear differences in their language levels. "There are differences in the level of their abilities in the receptive and productive skills, fluency and accuracy work, grammatical knowledge, size of vocabulary, command of pronunciation and so on" (Valentic, 2005, p.74). Moreover, Matthews-Aydinli & Horne (2006) defined mixed ability or multilevel classes as the classes where students with wide range of levels are placed together. They vary in their levels of competence in listening, reading, speaking and writing.

Students differ in their competence, motivation for learning English, needs, interest, styles of learning and experiences. Students have different needs and learning styles. There are learners who are bright and can comprehend easily, learners who can hardly understand basic information and learners who fall somewhere in between these two extremes (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2005). In a classroom, the teacher can find students who are motivated- an essential factor in language acquisition- as well as others who do not have interest for learning a new language (Simanova, 2010).

Students differ in their language proficiency and they even differ in their attitudes towards learning a language and they differ in self-discipline (Valentic, 2005). Moreover, Gordon (2010) defines mixed-ability classes as a descriptor used to describe students who are in the same grade and have similar background, but they differ in their abilities in the subject area.

Mixed-ability classes are considered as a universal phenomenon. Students are set in classes according to their age and year of study. They are grouped randomly regardless of their attainment and levels of ability (Lyle, 1999; Bremner, 2008). Therefore, every class is multileveled. Some classes might be more multileveled than others and as a result they are more challenging for the teachers (Tomlinson, 2012 and 2014). The literature indicates that teachers

face challenges as they are not equipped with the necessary skills and methodologies to deal with mixed ability students. They lack the training programs that would help them deal with this situation (Butterworth, 2010; Xanthou & Pavlou (2010).

This heterogeneity may create situations that challenge teachers while trying to give all learners the opportunity to learn and succeed (Hernandez, 2012; Ur, 1991; Ellis, 1994; Skehan, 2002; Lington and Spada, 2002; Reyes and Rodriguez, 2005; Simanova, 2010; Umair, 2010; Harris, 2012; Woodward, 2005; and Montes Reyes, P., & Rodriguez Formoso, 2006). Considering mixed ability classes and ways to plan for teaching them depends not only on students' levels, but also on the subject matter. Good and Brophy (1987) pointed out that teaching languages and mathematics is more challenging than teaching other subjects. The content in both languages and mathematics is almost abstract and hierarchically organized when compared to subjects such as history, literature or social studies where the curriculum materials can be related to everyday experience and commonsense explanations. Therefore, teachers of languages and mathematics are faced with more challenges than other teachers.

Language teachers feel confused when some learners acquire features of the language fast while other learners in the same class show little or no improvement. The reason could be related to second language acquisition as there are many factors that could influence learning outcomes in language classrooms. Learners' aptitude and motivation towards learning a new language are the main factors that affect their performance in language classes (Ellis, 1994).

Research has dealt with how teachers can deal with mixed ability classes (Westwood, and Arnold, 2004; Kerry, 1984; Slavin, 1996; Prodromou, 1992; Auerbach, 2000; Tomlinson, 2001; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 1996; Pham Phu, 2007; Morris, 2008; Gupta, 2004; Auerbach, 2000; Miller and Prince, 1976; Karlen, 2005; McNamara and Morton, 1997; and Bremner, 2008; Simanova, 2010). However, in real teaching contexts still little attention has been paid to prepare and train teachers on how to cater for the different ability levels. They are not given many guidelines to help them prepare for suitable adaptation according to students' needs. The teacher's book, for example, does not support teachers in differentiating the materials in order to cope with mixed ability classes (Perera, 2010). It is very common for most teachers to try to deal with the situation through 'teaching the average', leaving slow learners struggling and failing to involve advanced students at the same time.

2. Some Related Studies

A study was done in Japan among some EFL teachers about their perspectives regarding streamed and mixed-ability classes. The majority preferred streamed classes as students benefit more. They believed that lesson instructions and materials could be better and better tailored to the students' current level. Some other teachers who favored mixed-ability classes believed that lower achievers might be motivated to catch up to their higher level classmates. Both higher and lower achievers would benefit by working together if a wide range of learning activities were provided for them (Millan & Joyce, 2011).

A double case study was done in Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The researcher had experience as an English teacher in both countries. She met many challenges as the classes were mixed ability. Students differed in their abilities and in their motivation towards learning English. She tried to prove the importance of collaborative learning and peer-tutoring. She used different activities with her students to improve their interaction with each other and to understand the importance of supporting each other. She found what students really needed in mixed ability classes was collaborative learning and the chance to make a real shift from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogy in the classroom. Then the learning environment would be cooperative rather than competitive. Students would eagerly help each other if they have the qualified teacher who can guide them and applies the appropriate strategies (Hernandez, 2012).

Butterworth (2010) conducted research to investigate the situation of gifted students in mixed ability classrooms. The purpose of the study was to understand teachers' attitudes and experiences in mixed ability classes. Interviews and class observations were used to collect and analyze the data. The findings showed that teachers need to be trained on how to deal with mixed ability students, and to take care of gifted students. Also, it showed that following different strategies and methods in the classroom may help all students to participate. A similar study conducted in the USA investigated teachers' readiness to teach mixed-ability classes. The researcher found that teachers need to be well-prepared during their study and also need an in-service program to develop their abilities to deal with students' differences (Kantor, 2011).

A study carried out in Cyprus (Xanthou and Pavlou, 2010) investigated teachers' and students' attitudes in mixed ability EFL classes. The researcher used two instruments in his study, a Likert-type questionnaire with 114 teachers

and class observation. He investigated some of the challenges as some students were advanced and took many turns to participate while others might not speak for the whole lesson. Learners do not share the same language background. Moreover, the textbooks may not accommodate the needs of different students. Some students may lose interest in the textbook as it is too difficult for them while others may find it extremely easy. This problem may disturb discipline in the classroom. The researcher recommended increasing teaching hours and using methodologies that address students' needs. Also, courses and training are essential for EFL teachers. Educational authorities should pay attention to mixed ability classes and how to prepare suitable textbooks according to their different needs.

Another study was conducted by Svard (2006). She studied how upper secondary English teachers should work in order to reach the weaker students. According to the findings from the interviews from interviews, the best way was through ability grouping. The most important factors according to the teachers were: a good atmosphere, Clear instructions, structure, and setting routines.

In the Omani context, Al-Badi (2006) conducted a study about teachers' use of groupwork in Omani Basic schools. In his study, the literature emphasized the importance of group work to motivate students who differ in their abilities and learning styles. However, Al- Badi found that Omani teachers sometimes avoid organizing pupils in groups as they think it is just a waste of time and that students do not benefit much.

As the above studies reveal, different research findings show the challenges that teachers face in mixed-ability classes. Researchers and educators suggested different strategies in order to overcome those challenges. However, teachers need good training to deal with the situation and improve their students' learning. As it is clear from the literature surveyed, no similar study has been conducted in Oman. Therefore, the researchers used the knowledge gained from related previous studies to develop the research tool and to conduct this study in the Omani context.

In Oman, age- based and mixed ability settings have been the norms in schools. In all government schools, students are grouped in the same class according to the year of study and to their age. Therefore, classrooms include students from varying levels and different needs. Most classes are relatively large, consisting of about 30 to 35 students. Teachers always find it challenging to meet the various needs of their students. Utilizing demanding activities is good for high level students but too difficult for other levels. At the same time, using easy ones may help low achievers to participate but leaves out good students feeling bored and uninterested. This dilemma has led teachers and even curriculum designers to design activities that mainly suit average levels.

According to the researcher's eleven-years of teaching experience, the situation in Oman is not different from other countries. English teachers face challenges in dealing with students as the classes are increasing in both size and diversity of abilities. As the researcher has teaching experience in cycle two schools (i.e. grades 5-10), she finds that grade five teachers face more challenges than other teachers. Their students go through physical and emotional transition by moving from cycle one (i.e. grades 1-4) to cycle two schools.

They usually come from a learning environment where teachers treat them as young learners to an environment where they view them as adults and expect them to be more responsible. In addition, cycle one assessment system is different from cycle two as it does not include end of semester examination. Moreover, interviewing fifteen teachers who taught grade five in an exploratory study about the challenges in their classes indicated that they face difficulties in coping with the diversity of the classes and providing all students with suitable materials. They try to conduct some extra activities to involve all students, but they are not always helpful.

As mentioned previously and to the best knowledge of the researchers, no study has been conducted to investigate this issue in the Omani context. The researchers feel a need to investigate the challenges encountered by teachers in mixed ability classes and the strategies used to overcome these challenges. This study therefore aims to examine the challenges that Omani EFL grade five teachers face and the strategies they implement to meet their students' needs in a mixed ability context.

3. Significance of the Study

- 1- The study sheds light on the importance of increasing teachers' awareness and readiness to work in a mixed ability context in order to minimize the number of low achievers in this grade and consequently in upper grades.
- 2- It can be used by trainers to prepare teachers for challenges in mixed ability classes and how to use suitable strategies to overcome those challenges.
- 3- It encourages researchers to conduct further research in the area of the study.

- 4- It is the first study conducted to investigate this issue in the Omani context.

4. Method

4.1. Questions of the Study

More specifically, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the challenges faced by EFL grade five teachers in mixed -ability classes?
- 2- What strategies do EFL teachers use to cope with these challenges?
- 3- Are there significant differences between EFL male and female teachers when facing these challenges?
- 4- Are there significant differences between EFL male and female teachers in using different strategies?
- 5- Are there significant differences between teachers in the strategies they adopt to cope with the challenges based on their years of teaching experience?

4.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of EFL teachers in cycle 2 Basic Education Schools (5 – 10), who teach grade five in the academic year 2012 /2013 in three governorates South Batinah, Muscat and Dakhelya. The researchers decided to take three educational governorates as representative of the whole Sultanate.

The sample comprised 180 teachers who were selected randomly from the three governorates and they represented 60% of male and female grade five English teachers in cycle two schools in the selected governorates. Of the 180 subjects, 94 male teachers and 86 female teachers represented two teachers teaching grade five at each school. The non-proportional sample was taken representing 60% of the whole population which is about 300 teachers.

4.3 The Questionnaire

To develop the questionnaire, the researchers relied on analyzing grade five textbooks and the information gathered through asking some grade 5 teachers about their experiences and challenges. Moreover, they relied on some studies and books to develop the section on challenges faced in mixed ability classes (such as Prodromou, 1992; Hess, 2001; Manion & Morison, 1996; Ur, 1991; Tomlinson, 2001). Some authors (Brown, 2004; Xanthou and Pavlou, 2010) suggested many strategies related to materials and authentic learning. The questionnaire is divided into six categories which are: teaching and learning, motivation, classroom management, materials, needs analysis, and evaluation. Each category includes different related items.

The questionnaire was the main tool in the study. It consists of three parts. The first part investigated the demographic information about the participants such as gender and years of experience. The second part consisted of some possible challenges faced by teachers and the third part included the strategies the teachers used to overcome those challenges. The questionnaire was based on a 5- point Likert scale (see Appendix B). The teachers were asked to rate the frequency of the possible challenges and the implemented strategies, using the following scale:

5= always 4= Very often 3= Often 2= Seldom 1= Never

There were two open-ended questions. The first was about other challenges that teachers face in mixed-ability classes. The second one was at the end of part three and it asked teachers to mention any different strategies they applied in their classes.

The objectives of the questionnaire were:

- To investigate challenges and obstacles teachers had in grade five mixed ability classes.
- To identify strategies followed by teachers to overcome these challenges.
- To investigate if teachers were well trained and qualified to deal with students who have different needs and abilities.
- To find out if there were differences between teachers in using strategies which can be attributed to years of experience.
- To find out if there were differences between male and female teachers in the strategies they use to overcome the challenges

The questionnaire was validated for clarity and relevance by 10 experts from the College of Education, College of Arts, and Language Center at Sultan Qaboos University. The reliability was established and computed using Cronbach's alpha and it was .82.

5. Results

5.1 Question One

What are the common challenges faced by EFL grade five teachers in mixed-ability classes?

There were twenty-six items in the questionnaire related to the challenges faced by teachers in mixed-ability classes. These items were divided into four categories (teaching & learning, motivation, classroom management and material challenges). The participants were asked to respond to them using a Likert-type five point scale ranging from never to always.

For the purpose of interpreting the data, the means were divided as follows:

very high	High	Moderate	Low	very low
4.5 – 5	3.5 – 4.4	2.5 – 3.4	1.5 – 2.4	1- 1.4

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the Challenges Facing Teachers in Mixed-Ability Classes

Category	Mean	Std. dev.
Teaching and Learning	3.81	.64
Motivation	3.58	.66
Materials	3.51	.75
Management	3.40	.66
Total	3.64	.52

Results of the study revealed that teachers have high challenges in mixed- ability classes with an overall mean value of 3.64 out of 5. Challenges related to teaching and learning are the most frequent challenges teachers have with a mean of 3.81. Motivation challenges have a high mean of 3.58, followed by challenges related to materials with a mean value of 3.51. Challenges related to classroom management are the least frequent challenges faced by teachers with a mean value of 3.40, a moderate level of prevalence.

Appendix 1 displays the means and standard deviations of individual items in a descending order. Looking at the results in detail, it is clear there are two patterns, or levels of challenges which are high and moderate challenges. About 17 items present high challenges for teachers. On the other hand, about 9 items have moderate means which range from 3.04 to 3.37.

It is evident that EFL teachers in Oman face different challenges in teaching mixed-ability classes. This result is consistent with many studies that have showed the challenges facing teachers in mixed-ability classes. In these mixed-ability classes, teachers are faced with challenges in addressing the needs of students according to their differences. When teachers try to plan a lesson that fits the different levels, they find it difficult (Hernandez, 2012). Moreover, Xanthou & Pavlou (2010) found in their study conducted in Cyprus that teachers face many difficulties and the syllabus does not accommodate all the students with their different levels and abilities. This problem leads to disturbed discipline in the classroom and frustration among the students.

5.2 Question Two

What strategies do EFL teachers use to cope with these challenges?

In order to know the strategies that teachers frequently use in their mixed-ability classes, participants had to respond to 61 items in five categories, using a Likert-type five point scale ranging from never to always. Descriptive statistics were used by calculating means and standard deviations for each category related to strategies implemented in mixed-ability classes. The following table will show the results.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of the Different Strategies Used by Teachers in Mixed-Ability Classes

	Mean	Std. dev.
Management	3.68	.45
Materials	3.15	.54
Teaching	3.06	.37
Evaluation	3.05	.39
Needs analysis	2.93	.80
Motivation	2.87	.46
Total	3.15	.344

The results show that management strategies are used with a high mean value 3.68, while EFL teachers do not use the other strategies very often. Most of the strategies have moderate means 3.15, 3.06, 3.05, 2.93 and 2.87. These results indicate that teachers might not be well-trained to apply various strategies in their mixed-ability classes (see appendix 2 for the detailed results).

From the previous results, the researchers deduced that EFL teachers need more training and practice in implementing certain strategies with their students. Students may eagerly help each other if they have a qualified teacher to guide them and apply the appropriate strategies (Hernandez, 2012). A study conducted by Al-Rasbiah (2006) identified the in-service needs for grade 5-12 EFL teachers. The results emphasized the importance of in-service training to improve teachers' skills and strategies to deal with students' differences and to manage classrooms.

5.3 Question Three

Are there significant differences between male and female teachers in the challenges they face in mixed-ability classes?

To examine teachers' differences in facing different challenges with respect to their gender, a t-test was performed to determine if statically significant differences existed between male and female teachers. The results of the test are given in Table 3.

Table 3. The t-test Results for the Comparisons between Male and Female Teachers in Levels of Challenges They Face in Mixed-Ability Classes.

Challenges	Gender	n	Mean	std. dev.	t-value	p-value
Teaching	Male	90	3.84	0.61	0.65	0.52
	Female	80	3.77	0.67		
Motivation	Male	90	3.60	0.65	0.56	0.57
	Female	80	3.55	0.65		
Management	Male	90	3.41	0.69	0.02	0.98
	Female	80	3.41	0.62		
Materials	Male	90	3.48	0.71	1.49	0.14
	Female	80	3.31	0.76		

It is clear from the t-test results presented in Table 6 that there are no statistically significant differences in the level of challenges faced by male and female teachers in mixed-ability classes ($p\text{-value} > 0.05$). This appears to indicate that both male and female teachers are similarly facing similar challenges. The results agreed with Svard's (2006) results that both male and female teachers in Bulgaria found it difficult to get students' attention and motivate them to participate during the class. Teachers found it difficult to meet all their students' needs as they did not have the time or the support from the school and the curriculum. Also, this revealed the fact that teachers do not have the pre-service and in-service training which enables them to address the challenges they may face in their classes and know how to deal with different abilities. Such a result might be attributed to the fact that both male and female teachers in Oman are teaching under similar conditions and as a result, are exposed to the same syllabus and administrative work.

5.4 Question Four

Are there significant differences between EFL male and female teachers in their use of different strategies in Omani schools?

Here the researchers tested the gender effect to see whether teachers' gender had an impact on EFL teachers' use of different strategies in their mixed-ability classes.

An independent sample t-test was calculated in order to see the differences between male and female EFL teachers in implementing different types of strategies. The results are reported in table 4.

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviations of Strategies Used by Male and Female Teachers in Mixed-Ability Classes

Strategies	Gender	Mean	Stand. Deviation	t-value	p-value
Needs	Male	3.03	0.84	1.73	0.086
	Female	2.83	0.75		
Teaching	Male	3.33	0.57	1.23	0.22
	Female	3.43	0.49		
Management	Male	3.64	0.46	1.33	0.19
	Female	3.73	0.43		
Motivation	Male	2.37	0.48	18.54	0.000
	Female	3.59	0.37		
Materials	Male	3.34	0.62	0.49	0.62
	Female	3.39	0.65		
Evaluation	Male	3.51	0.57	0.91	0.37
	Female	3.59	0.54		

Table 4 shows that there is no significant difference between male and female teachers in strategies used in mixed-ability classes with regard to needs, teaching, management, materials and evaluation (P -value > 0.05). This indicates that both use the same strategies to cope with the challenges. This can be attributed to the fact that both male and female teachers are exposed to the same curriculum and policies. However, with regard to motivation there is a significant difference between male and female teachers (P -value < 0.05). The differences in applying motivation strategies is in favor of female teachers. The average usage of that strategies is (3.59) for females compared to (2.37) for males. This would mean that female teachers are inclined to use this strategy more often than their male counterparts and that these strategies are much more popular and more frequently used by female teachers. The reason behind the difference is not clear. Female teachers could be more interested in the profession. So they are enthusiastic during their lessons and they try to encourage all students to participate

5.5 Question Five

Are there significant differences between teachers in the strategies they adopt to cope with the challenges based on their years of teaching experience?

This variable was expected to affect EFL teachers' use of different strategies is their years of teaching experience. The researchers divided teachers into less- experienced (1-3 years) and experienced teachers (10 years and more). The researcher chose two extreme contrasting groups to be compared and see the differences. Therefore the t-test was used to compare the means of teachers using strategies with regard to their different experiences. The descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) are shown in table 5.

Table 5. Mean and Standard Deviations of Strategies Used by Experienced and Less Experienced Teachers

Strategies	Experience	N	Mean	Std.dev
Needs	Less experienced	28	3.16	0.85
	Experienced	32	3.06	0.75
Teaching	Less experienced	28	3.42	0.71
	Experienced	32	3.30	0.44
Management	Less experienced	28	3.69	0.47
	Experienced	32	3.69	0.43
Motivation	Less experienced	28	3.33	0.59
	Experienced	32	3.21	0.54
Materials	Less experienced	28	3.42	0.59
	Experienced	32	3.45	0.54
Evaluation	Less experienced	28	3.43	0.49
	Less experienced	28	3.43	0.49

As can be seen from Table 5, there is no significant relationship between the strategies adopted by teachers and the years of their experience in teaching (P -value > 0.05). This would mean that teachers adopt the same strategies irrespective of their experience in teaching. Many teachers need practical ideas, strategies and techniques that enable

them to deal with students in the classroom (Brindly, 1989).

6. Summary

In order to answer the research questions, descriptive statistics and t-tests were used. The main findings of the study are:

1. EFL teachers face challenges related to teaching and learning, motivation, materials, and classroom management.
2. There are no statically significant differences between male and female teachers in facing different challenges in mixed-ability classes.
3. In order to cope with the challenges, teachers try to follow different strategies. Most strategies are in moderate and low level use by EFL teachers.
4. There are no statically significant differences between teachers attributable to the years of teaching experience in applying different strategies
5. There is a statically significant difference between male and female teachers in applying motivation strategies.
6. There are no statically significant differences between male and female teachers in applying the strategies related to needs analysis, teaching and learning, classroom management, materials and evaluation.

7. Conclusion

The EFL teachers in Oman face different challenges in mixed-ability classes. The results of the current study show the levels of challenges teachers face and the application of various strategies. Both male and female teachers face the same challenges and there is no significant difference between them in applying different strategies except in strategies related to motivation. These findings lend support to previous studies that showed no differences between teachers in facing and coping with challenges. Mathews, Aydinli & Horne (2006) pointed out in their study that teachers, regardless of their gender and experience, need in-service training. They need to acquire strategies that enable them to deal with different students. Another study found that most teachers face challenges in their mixed-ability classes and recommended more training for teachers to apply various strategies such as designing different activities and games (Morris, 2008).

Moreover, most use of strategies ranged from moderate to low with few strategies having a high level of use. This indicates that teachers need to be trained to deal with individual differences and care about the students' different abilities. Students in mixed-ability classes need to be treated equally with understanding of their needs. The curriculum does not provide teachers with the necessary techniques that can help them to deal with mixed-ability classes. In addition, teachers should be qualified and well-trained to cope with different challenges.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Recommendations for EFL Teachers

Since EFL teachers face different challenges in their classes and they do not apply the different strategies frequently, the researchers propose the following recommendations to be implemented. The teachers need to:

- Be aware of students' different abilities in acquiring the foreign language and the pace they need for comprehension.
- Have knowledge about their students' needs and interests.
- Establish a good relationship with students to reduce their fear and anxiety of learning a foreign language.
- Encourage students to participate and express their needs through discussion, questionnaires, journals, etc.
- Train students to be self-reflective and teach them techniques for self and peer-assessment.
- Teach learners effective techniques in order to improve their levels and be active learners.
- Be supportive and enthusiastic so students can feel confident during English classes.
- Update their knowledge and information about the use of different strategies.
- Discuss their experiences together in order to support their learners.

- Have effective techniques in selecting tasks that can fit different levels.

8.2 Recommendations for Policy Makers

The findings of the study highlight the needs for training and professional development programs for English teachers in dealing with different abilities in the classes. Some suggestions for policy makers include:

- Increase teachers' awareness of mixed-ability classes through workshops, courses and visits.
- Provide teachers with pre-service and in-service training to enable them to deal with mixed-ability classes.
- The syllabus should be flexible and contain activities that suit students' different levels.
- Teachers' book can be a good tool for teachers to help them to deal with students' different needs and abilities.
- Teachers can have the opportunities to modify the syllabus and lesson plans according to their students' abilities.

8.3 Recommendations for Further Studies

- Further studies can replicate this study using a larger sample and different academic levels.
- Experimental studies can be carried out to find out the effect of using different strategies to reduce the challenges in mixed-ability classes.
- Other studies can investigate students' perceptions about the difficulties they have in their classes while learning a foreign language.
- This study can be replicated to investigate supervisors' perceptions about how teachers cope with different abilities in their classes and what those teachers actually need.
- A similar study can be carried out with different level in schools or even in colleges.
- Further studies can use a questionnaire supported by classroom observations.

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Appendix 1

Means and standard deviations of the challenges related to the specific items in the different dimensions

Items	Mean	Std.dev
Teaching and Learning		
Teaching large course book does not help me to follow individual students.	4.27	.914
Many students are unable to communicate using English especially low achievers.	4.09	.938
There is a wide gap among students' levels in different skills.	3.94	.956
The coursebooks' activities do not suit the different levels of the students.	3.71	.955
It is difficult to plan a balanced lesson that fits all students with their different abilities.	3.46	1.02
I cannot satisfy the needs of all students.	3.37	1.06
Motivation		
Lack of confidence with some students leads them not to communicate in class.	3.82	1.08
Some students quickly lose interest as they have very low language ability.	3.70	1.03
Simplifying the lesson for low ability students decreases good students' interest.	3.63	1.12
There is a lack of motivation among some students in the class.	3.59	1.04
Low level students feel they are treated unequally in mixed ability classes.	3.56	1.04
It is difficult to ensure that all students are challenged and interested.	3.49	1.01
High level students feel they are treated unequally in mixed ability classes.	3.31	1.11
Materials		
It is difficult to design different activities for different levels to achieve the same goal.	3.56	1.08
Annual plans and lesson plans prevent us from adapting various activities.	3.51	1.14
The teacher's book does not support me with effective strategies to deal with mixed ability classes.	3.47	1.14
Course books are designed solely for average learners neglecting high and low achievers.	3.34	1.29
It is difficult to find appropriate teaching resources for different levels.	3.26	1.15
It is difficult for me to design or adapt different materials regularly.	3.19	1.13
Classroom management		
It is difficult to pay equal attention to each student in the class.	3.73	1.05
It is a demanding task for me to deal with the students' differences in a mixed ability class.	3.70	.91
Lack of involvement leads some students to cause problems in the class.	3.54	1.09
It is difficult to devote equal time to all students.	3.51	1.03
I use L1 to manage the class and clarify instructions.	3.22	1.03
Bright students are likely to be neglected or held back in mixed ability classes.	3.04	1.23
It is difficult to organize appropriate grouping in the class.	3.04	1.16

Appendix 2

Means and standard deviations of the Strategies related to the specific items in the different dimensions

Items	Mean	Std.dev
Classroom management		
Calling students by their names to feel respected and pay attention.	4.13	.92
Involving high level students in class management to save teacher's time.	3.99	.93
Varying voice to make the meaning clear and get students' attention.	3.96	.79
Giving students time to copy important information from the board.	3.94	.84
Working closely with low level students to motivate them.	3.81	.81
Giving extra activities to the group or the students who finish earlier.	3.76	.87
Varying the pace and level of instructions.	3.64	.84
Using art and images to attract students' attention.	3.63	.78
Students sit in groups forming different shapes.	3.50	1.04
Changing pairs from time to time.	3.43	1.03
Personalizing tasks (students talk about themselves and their experiences).	3.41	.85
Assigning mixed - ability group project (students get different roles while working in the project).	3.39	.925
Using in-class peer- tutoring.	3.27	.831
Materials		
Using simplified materials that are not demanding for low level students.	3.43	.95
Using a bank of materials at school with activities with different levels.	3.41	1.04
Preparing handouts before the beginning of the semester.	3.41	1.06
Adapting open-ended tasks (summary, analysis, express opinions).	3.23	.97
Applying Jigsaw activities (each student is doing a part).	3.01	.95
Using more communicative activities (games, puzzles, etc.)	2.80	.68
Using more authentic materials beside the course book.	2.78	.58
Teaching and learning		
Explaining the purpose of homework for the students.	3.69	.979
Regular class observations among teachers.	3.59	.926
Writing the aims of the lesson on the board regularly.	3.53	1.06
Planning to observe 3 or 4 students everyday while walking around the class.	3.53	.912
Applying creative tasks that allow students to work at their own levels (story, opinion, diary).	3.52	.930
Designing vocabulary cards to improve reading ability.	3.37	1.01
Summarizing the lesson with the students.	3.34	.77
Giving extra lessons for some students.	3.28	.94
Exchanging ideas with other teachers	3.21	.91
Teaching students the importance of note taking.	3.16	1.02
Providing students with information gap activities	3.14	.74
Using different levels of stories and folktales.	2.95	.76
Encouraging students to reconstruct stories.	2.74	.77
Mixing compulsory with optional tasks.	2.73	.79
Applying multilevel dictation (blank sheet of paper, a medium level cloze and a cloze with only a few blanks.	2.34	.91

Having drama and sketch (miming, role play, etc.) in class to have a stress free environment.	2.32	.71
Providing a menu of work for the students and they choose.	2.32	.89
Involving low level students in English club Activities.	2.26	.87
Evaluation		
Giving regular progress tests.	3.23	.79
Applying peer assessment technique to exchange experience and cooperate together.	3.23	1.02
Providing immediate, relevant, and explicit feedback.	3.18	.84
Assessing students' portfolios regularly.	3.02	.78
Contacting parents to discuss their children's levels	3.01	.81
Using formative assessment to evaluate students' progress.	2.97	.79
Practicing self- assessment technique with students.	2.69	.85
Needs analysis		
Continuous reflection and assessment on students' performance.	3.38	.89
Using a checklist as progress indicators (to show students' performance and reflect their needs).	3.07	1.04
Applying students' journals, especially for bright students.	2.98	1.19
Organizing meetings with students to discuss their goals and needs with the teachers.	2.77	1.18
Tape recorded or video recorded class interaction.	2.68	1.29
Using questionnaires to understand students' needs and levels.	2.33	1.21
Motivation and interest		
Students design their own glossaries to write new words and definitions.	3.35	.97
Students interview each other to complete questionnaires or to talk about themselves.	3.22	.95
Working on interesting topics (hobbies ,home, friends, food, etc.)	3.12	1.07
Using Internet and computers during classes to get students' interest.	3.09	1.13
Taking students to the Learning Resource Centre to choose what they want to read.	3.04	1.04
Encouraging students to express their expectations about the new units.	3.00	.74
Students work together to write their own stories.	2.85	.99
Encouraging students to put suggestions or complaints about the lessons in a box in their classroom.	2.53	1.20
Students discuss together how they can accomplish their goals.	2.35	.78
Encouraging students to set goals for themselves.	2.19	.79