

# Challenges in Managing Mixed Ability Students in English Language Teaching Classes

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## Abstract

The data were analyzed using descriptive and statistical methods. The study found that secondary level English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers face several challenges when managing mixed ability students. These challenges include dealing with weak students and homework, controlling different behaviors, addressing learners' disinterest and discipline issues, correcting daily assignments, using various techniques and materials, teachers' negative attitudes, and students' different language levels, backgrounds, and intelligences. The study also identified effective strategies for managing mixed ability students, such as conducting pair and group work, focusing on weak students, using project work and collaboration, providing open-ended exercises, making the classroom engaging, and encouraging stronger students to help weaker ones. Additionally, textbooks were not seen as the best tool for addressing the needs of mixed ability students. Most teachers viewed their mixed ability classes as an opportunity.

## Keywords

ELT, Class, Ability, Mixed, Language

## 1. Introduction

English has become a threat to global linguistic diversity. According to White, Hockley, Vandor, Jansen, and Laughner, English Language Teaching (ELT), also known as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), is a global phenomenon happening in almost every country [1]. Many institutions and language organizations provide English teaching. As a result, English has become a common language for many people worldwide, and the number of English users keeps growing every day.

In Nepal, English is taught and learned as a foreign and second language from early school to university level. Nepal is a country with many cultures, languages, and ethnic groups, making classrooms diverse. Students in ELT classes have different abilities, interests, and learning styles. Richards says every class has students with mixed abilities [2]. Copur agrees that no two students have exactly the same skills [3]. Some students learn fast, some slow, and others average. This variety makes teaching English challenging.

Classroom management is very important because it affects how well students learn and how well teachers can teach. Many teachers find it difficult to manage mixed-ability classes in ELT. To help students learn successfully, teachers must manage their classrooms well and create a good learning environment. They should also study classroom problems carefully and find the best ways to handle students with different abilities.

## 2. Problem

Mixed capability is not a difficult itself. Many educators face challenges in selecting the right tasks, teaching methods, materials, and techniques for their students. They also struggle with issues like lack of student participation, discipline problems, correcting work, making the classroom engaging, and giving equal attention to all students. Harmer notes the many teachers worry about having students with different skill levels in their classes [4]. In mixed ability classes, even experienced teachers have trouble managing the classroom, and it can be especially difficult for new teachers. The teachers with 25 years of experience can still encounter classroom management issues. The teaching methods and strategies used may not work for all students due to their varying abilities and learning styles, making it hard for teachers to achieve their teaching goals.

This shows that managing mixed ability students in English Language Teaching (ELT) classes is a common problem today. Students with different proficiency levels are a major challenge for teachers worldwide. Effective classroom management is crucial in mixed ability ELT classes because without it, learning cannot happen effectively. Therefore, it is important for teachers to monitor each student and address their needs in various ways to ensure successful teaching.

### 3. Objective

To recognize the tasks of managing diverse ability students in ELT classes faced by secondary level ELT teachers.

### Review of Literature

#### 3.1 Management

Research on classroom management shows management is essential in every field, especially in education, where its importance is growing. Management generally means developing and maintaining an organization using available resources. Different scholars define management in various ways. For example, White et al. say, "Management is fundamental to how any organization, including any language teaching organization, operates, survives, and develops." This means it involves the overall development of an organization [1]. Gardner and Miller add that management adapts commercial techniques to meet the unique needs of educational institutions [5]. In essence, management is about achieving goals by using different techniques effectively.

##### 3.1.1 Management Functions

The tasks accomplished through management are called management functions. Gardner and Miller states that management involves operating an organization to make the best use of its resources to achieve its goals [5]. Management includes several functions. White et al. categorize these functions into four useful areas for teachers managing their classes [1]:

###### 1. Planning

Planning involves deciding what needs to happen in the future and creating plans to achieve goals. Richards and Renandya notes that planning is key to teaching a successful lesson [6]. Without good planning, effective learning cannot occur, so teachers should prepare their lesson plans before class.

###### 2. Organizing

The organizing means using resources effectively to carry out plans. Teachers should arrange their teaching activities and tasks well to improve learning outcomes in the classroom.

###### 3. Leading/Motivating

This function involves using management skills to encourage others to contribute effectively to achieving plans and developing their skills. It helps teachers present lessons, share knowledge, and engage students in classroom activities.

###### 4. Controlling

Controlling involves checking progress against plans and making adjustments based on feedback. This function allows teachers to evaluate their teaching, assess student progress, and modify plans as needed.

Overall, management is a systematic process of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. For effective teaching and learning, teachers should understand these management functions and apply them in the classroom to create a positive learning environment.

##### 3.1.2 Classroom Management

Research shows that classrooms are filled with diverse learners who have different opinions, perceptions, language levels, abilities, and preferences. Teachers must address and respect these differences to achieve successful learning outcomes. Because of this diversity, teachers often face challenges in classroom management. Today, classroom management is a key concern for all teachers, whether experienced or new. White et al. states all language teaching organizations, regardless of size and context, need to be managed [1]. Well-managed classes enhance teaching and learning and encourage student participation. Therefore, every class should be managed properly for better teaching and learning.

#### 3.2 Mixed Ability ELT Classes

Mixed ability learners are found in almost every classroom around the world. It is natural for students to have different abilities and skill levels in a class. Each classroom has students who vary in their nature, language skills, needs, attitudes, motivation, and learning experiences. Baker and Westrup mentions students differ in language levels, skills, learning speeds, interests, and confidence [7]. Classes may also include students of different ages, making all classes mixed ability. Educators describe mixed ability classes as diverse, with students differing in learning styles, preferences, and abilities. Ur explains that mixed ability covers many differences among learners beyond just language proficiency, including how they learn and need to be taught [8]. This term includes differences in aptitude, needs, interests, language knowledge, learning strategies, and cultural backgrounds. Harmer adds that students vary in age, motivation, responsibility, and cultural background, which causes varied learning styles [9]. Teachers should consider these differences when teaching.

Hess calls mixed ability classes "multilevel classes" [10]. Ur notes that these classes differ in much more than just English knowledge; even classes grouped by ability remain heterogeneous [8]. Valentic points out students differ in skills such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, and listening [11]. Some students excel in these areas, while others need more support. Ainslie highlights differences in motivation, needs, interests, and anxiety among students [12]. Ur says ability includes potential learning ability, affected by factors like prior learning opportunities and motivation [8]. According to a report cited by Dhimi, students also come from various cultural, social, and economic backgrounds, with some labeled gifted and others needing special education plans [13]. In every class, there are high achievers and low achievers. Brighter students need less support, while low achievers need specific attention.

Mixed ability classrooms thus contain learners with diverse language abilities and cultural, educational, and social backgrounds. Teachers should recognize these multiple intelligences and talents to help all students succeed. Many teachers struggle to identify their learners' backgrounds and abilities, which limits their ability to use the best teaching methods. Ur lists factors that make learners different, including language ability, cultural background, attitude, experience, age, gender, personality, motivation, and education [8]. Because of these differences, students perform differently in class. More proficient students finish tasks faster, while less proficient ones need more help. Ur further states that gender, age, knowledge, personality, motivation, and cultural background contribute to classroom diversity [8]. In sum, students' proficiency and ability to learn language are key factors in mixed ability ELT classes, which is the main focus of this study.

### **Advantages of Heterogeneous (Mixed) Classes**

Mixed ability classes can be challenging for English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers, but they also have many advantages. These classes are not just a burden; they offer opportunities for exploration. Ur states that interacting with different kinds of people has educational value, as students can help and learn from each other [8]. Tomlinson adds that mixed ability classes allow teachers to grow professionally by encouraging them to solve problems and try different teaching methods [14]. Therefore, teaching a diverse group of students can be seen positively, as it promotes teachers' professional development through various approaches and techniques.

### **3.3 Effective Learning for All**

Every student learns differently. Some may find tasks easy, while others struggle. Since students come from different backgrounds, this can make it hard for teachers to ensure effective learning for everyone. Hess emphasizes the importance of allowing each student to find their unique way of learning, so teachers need to monitor all students to achieve effective teaching [10].

### **3.4 Selecting Appropriate Tasks and Materials**

Choosing the right tasks and materials is difficult because of the mixed abilities of learners. Copur points out that most language textbooks are designed for ideal classrooms, so students often react differently to them. Some may find the textbook boring or hard, while others find it interesting or easy [3]. This shows that tasks and materials are often aimed at specific types of learners and may not offer flexibility.

### **3.5 Participation**

Getting all students to participate is another challenge in mixed ability ELT classes. Ur notes only a few confident students respond actively, while others may seem bored [8]. Hess also mentions feeling discouraged when only a few students participate [10]. More proficient students tend to engage more than weaker ones, making it hard for teachers to involve quieter students.

### **3.6 Discipline Problems**

Teachers face discipline issues in mixed ability ELT classes. They cannot pay attention to every student, which may lead weaker students to stray off-topic. Hess states that weaker students may struggle to finish tasks quickly, lose confidence, and show poor behavior [10]. Bright students often grasp the material easily, while weaker ones need more help, leading to frustration and discipline problems.

### **3.7 Interest**

Keeping all students interested in mixed ability ELT classes is challenging. Some find the topics engaging, while others may get bored. Ur expresses difficulty in finding topics and activities that interest everyone [8]. Thus, teachers struggle to provide content that motivates all learners.

### **3.8 Individual Awareness**

In mixed ability ELT classes, teachers cannot give equal time and attention to all students. They may find it hard to track each student's progress. Ur mentions that it is difficult to know and follow the progress of all individuals in a diverse class [8]. Therefore, giving equal attention to each student is challenging.

### 3.9 Correcting Assignments

Many teachers focus on teaching and neglect the correction of assignments due to the heavy marking load. Ur states they cannot keep up with grading, which can lead to increased language errors and negatively affect learning outcomes [8]. Involving students in correcting each other's work can help reduce the teacher's workload.

### 4. Ways of Managing Mixed Ability Students in ELT Classes

Mixed ability ELT classes require various teaching methods and activities. Teachers must analyze classroom needs and develop appropriate techniques. Stevick compares teachers to powerful pieces on a chessboard, suggesting they shape classroom dynamics [15]. Tomlinson emphasizes that teachers should leave class with questions to ponder for better future lessons [14]. Without proper lesson preparation, teachers may face management issues.

Teachers of mixed ability classes encounter many challenges, and there are no perfect solutions. However, various scholars suggest different methods for managing these classes. Hess notes there are strategies to cope with challenges [10]. Teachers' attitudes towards mixed ability students can significantly impact their learning success. Dornyei stresses the importance of teachers showing enthusiasm for their subject, as this can motivate students [16]. Using negative language towards slower learners can harm motivation and discipline. Therefore, teachers should develop positive attitudes towards their students and the learning process to improve outcomes. Teachers need to create techniques, materials, and activities to support stronger, average, and weaker students. Baker and Westrup suggest allowing students to move around to work with different classmates, which helps them feel involved and receive more attention from the teacher [7]. They also recommend using pair work and group work to manage large mixed ability classes, as these methods can boost motivation and provide more practice opportunities. Project work is another effective approach that can be adapted for various levels and abilities, making it suitable for large mixed ability classes.

#### Working with Different Contents

Teachers can work with students of different levels and needs by giving them different materials suited to their individual learning abilities. Students can choose which grammar or vocabulary exercises to do, making learning more personalized. When giving students different tasks, teachers can assign various activities like interpreting information, answering open-ended or multiple-choice questions based on each student's level. Teachers can also assign different roles in the classroom, such as role-playing as a police officer, to make lessons more engaging. Students who finish tasks early should be rewarded with extra activities to challenge them further, but these tasks should not feel like punishment.

Teachers should expect and accept different student responses to the same tasks, allowing creative answers. It's also useful for teachers to recognize students' strengths, whether they are good in languages or other areas like art, music, or acting. Giving students chances to shine in their talents helps build confidence.

In mixed ability classes, teachers need to respond thoughtfully to students, giving sensitive corrections and help when needed without ignoring any student. Inclusion is important teachers must engage all students so no one feels left out or unchallenged. Flexible grouping is a good strategy, mixing students of different levels to benefit both stronger and weaker learners.

Teachers should be realistic about what differentiation is possible, considering classroom size and resources. Using these strategies helps keep classes organized and makes learning better for all students.

### 5. Procedures of the Study

Nunan mentions that, the main purpose of a "survey is to obtain a snapshot of conditions, attitudes, and events at a single point of time [17]." Survey research helps to obtain a wide range of information. Therefore, I had gone through the following steps of conducting surveys mentioned by Nunan [17]:

- Step 1: Define objectives
- Step 2: Identifying target population
- Step 3: Literature review
- Step 4: Determine sample
- Step 5: Identifying survey instruments
- Step 6: Design survey procedures
- Step 7: Identify analytical procedures
- Step 8: Determine reporting procedure

Furthermore, survey is one of the best methods used in educational research studies. It is mainly carried out to find out people's attitudes, opinions and the specified behavior on certain issues, phenomena, events and situations. I applied

survey research by building a good rapport with the school administrations and ELT teachers of selected schools to obtain the objectives of my research study.

The population of this research study was all the secondary level ELT teachers of Lalitpur district. The sample of the study was thirty secondary level ELT teachers working in private schools of Lalitpur district. I applied non-random purposive sampling procedure in this research study to fulfill the objectives of the study with comfortability of access to teachers for collecting data.

After collecting data, I analyzed the qualitative data in a narrative way with descriptions and quantitative data were interpreted with the help of simple statistical tools like table in order to find out the conclusion.

### **Analysis of Study**

This part of the research study presents the analysis and interpretation of the data. The data were collected from 30 secondary level English language teachers to find the results. The respondents were chosen using a non-random purposive sampling method to meet the study's objectives. A questionnaire was used to collect data for this research. A set of questionnaires was given to the selected secondary level English language teachers to identify the challenges and ways to manage mixed ability students in ELT classes. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale, where respondents indicated their agreement with statements about the challenges and management strategies for mixed ability students. The options included 'strongly agree,' 'agree,' 'undecided,' 'disagree,' and 'strongly disagree.' The collected data were then analyzed and interpreted. The following section includes the analysis of the data from the study.

#### **5.1 Ways of Managing Mixed Ability Students in ELT Classes**

This part of the questionnaire included statements about how teachers manage mixed ability students in their classes. The data from the teachers are analyzed and interpreted below:

##### **Teachers' Skills and Preparation**

One statement asked whether teachers should have good teaching skills and adequate preparation for managing students in mixed ability classes.

##### **Analysis of Data from Open-ended Questionnaire**

A set of questionnaires was given to selected secondary level ELT teachers to gather their views on mixed ability classes, including challenges and management strategies. The collected data were analyzed descriptively and narratively to draw conclusions. The analysis focused on the following criteria:

##### **Students' Different Abilities and Levels in English Classes**

The first question asked whether teachers see students' different abilities and levels in English as a problem. The question was, "Do you think that students in English classes have many different abilities and levels? Is it a problem? Why or why not?" All selected secondary level ELT teachers agreed that students generally have different abilities and levels in English classes. However, the majority of teachers (60%) viewed these differences as a problem because they faced challenges such as:

- Difficulty controlling the class
- Struggles with weak students
- Adjusting the course to fit varying learning levels
- Meeting the needs of all learners
- Using various teaching methods and materials
- Addressing students' different linguistic backgrounds
- Students' hesitation to speak English
- Varying levels of understanding and interest
- Difficulty achieving lesson objectives
- Low participation from weaker students

On the other hand, nearly half of the teachers (40%) did not see students' different abilities and levels as a problem for several reasons:

- ✓Different abilities and levels are a natural part of being human.
- ✓It is normal to have diverse abilities in a classroom.
- ✓These differences encourage teachers to develop new techniques to address challenges.
- ✓Mixed ability classes allow teachers to recognize individual talents and differences.

Overall, among the 30 secondary level ELT teachers, the majority (60%) considered students' different abilities and levels to be a problem in the classroom.

## 5.2 Problems and Challenges in Managing Mixed Ability Students in ELT Classes

The teachers were asked about the problems they face in managing mixed ability students in ELT classes. Many said it's hard to give different methods and tasks for the same lesson. They struggle to motivate less interested students and handle homework. It's difficult because some students understand quickly while others find the same things complex. Weak students learn slower, and it's tough to control different student behaviors and make lesson plans that fit everyone. Teachers also find it hard to keep special needs students focused and manage noise from fast finishers. Sometimes students are not serious or responsive, and they prefer easy ways of learning. Large class sizes, lack of materials and students' different backgrounds also create challenges.

To manage these challenges, teachers use various strategies like group, pair, and team work activities. They give more time and focus to weaker students and organize students by ability level. Teachers create an English-speaking environment, communicate with parents, and use audio-visual materials. They provide regular classwork, homework, and projects while supervising students who need extra help. Using charts, pictures, and group leaders encourages participation. Teachers also use different teaching methods like discussion, role plays, and problem-solving. Flexible seating and giving tasks matched to each student's ability help keep the class organized. Most teachers find that these strategies help make the classroom more effective and interesting for all students.

## 5.3 Mixed Ability ELT Classes as an Opportunity

The last question asked the selected secondary level ELT teachers about the opportunities they find in mixed ability ELT classes. The question was, "Do you think mixed ability ELT classes are full of opportunities? If yes, what opportunities do you find?" Almost all the teachers (90%) viewed mixed ability ELT classes as an opportunity and shared the following benefits:

- Mixed ability classes helped teachers understand students' thoughts, ideas, and abilities.
- Teachers learned about the attitudes of mixed ability students.
- Both teachers and students gained more ideas and experiences in class.
- Teachers learned to use suitable teaching methods and techniques for their students.
- Students had the chance to learn from their peers.
- Mixed ability classes strengthened teachers' ability to face challenges.
- Teachers grew and learned more as educators.
- Teachers got to know their students' levels and improved their teaching methods.
- Teachers discovered various ways to handle mixed abilities, making learning more effective.
- Mixed ability classes made teachers more aware of teaching and learning, encouraging them to explore the subject matter deeply.
- Teachers developed their professional skills.
- Mixed ability ELT classes made teachers better, more dynamic, creative, knowledgeable, and constructive.
- Teachers understood students' difficulties and problems in learning.
- Mixed ability classes helped teachers understand society and improve their skills to handle various challenges.

However, a few teachers (10%) did not see their mixed ability ELT classes as an opportunity. They felt that these classes posed significant challenges, making it difficult to use different teaching methods and manage diverse students.

## 6. Conclusion

The world and people are not all the same, so mixed ability learners are found in almost every classroom. Many language teachers face challenges because students have different levels of proficiency. To understand these challenges, I conducted a study called 'Challenges in Managing Mixed Ability Students in ELT Classes.' It focused on secondary-level ELT teachers and how they manage their mixed ability students. After analyzing the data, I found that teachers struggle with managing weak students and homework, controlling behavior, dealing with student disinterest and discipline issues, correcting assignments, creating varied teaching techniques, and facing students' different language levels and backgrounds. About 60% of teachers saw the varied abilities in class as a problem. However, strategies like group work, focusing more on weaker students, teaching via projects, using open-ended exercises, and encouraging brighter students to help others were effective. Most teachers (about 90%) viewed mixed ability classes as an opportunity rather than a problem. Mixed ability classes are common worldwide and present both challenges and chances for growth. These classes are not problematic if teachers handle them well, respecting and welcoming learner differences.

The study suggests that the government should offer training and workshops for teachers about managing mixed ability classes. Extra challenging tasks should be given to quickly finishing students to keep them engaged. Lastly, teachers need to recognize the unique talents and strengths of each learner for better outcomes.

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