Learner-centered Group Work in Multi-level EFL Classes

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Abstract
Multi-level classes pose a formidable challenge to EFL teachers. Many researchers suggest group work as a solution but, in its traditional form, it may not lead to effective learning because some important decisions and arrangements are under the teacher's control. Taking essay writing and translation as examples, this study aims to propose some general and other course-specific measures whereby group work can be made more learner-centered. It constitutes a five-point departure from from traditional group work: the decision to do group work has to be based on the students' attitudes towards it and they have to form their own pairs and groups, choose a group leader by themselves, use L1 for asking for and offering assistance, and interact across groups. Further research is needed to verify the findings of this study and to explore ways of using learner-centered group work in teaching other EFL skills.
Key words: group work, learner-centered teaching, multi-level EFL classes

Introduction

Multi-level classes constitute one of nightmares of the teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). These are classes where the learners vary in their proficiency level, (Gordon, 2010) due to differences in learning styles, motivation, interests, needs, aptitude, attitudes, experiences, personalities and so forth, (Reyes and Rodriguez, 2005). As Ur (1991) noted, terms such as 'mixed-ability' and 'heterogeneous' classes are not accurate since no two students are identical in their proficiency level and, hence, no class is really homogeneous. Not only do students differ in overall proficiency level in the language (i.e. inter-learner variation), a student's level may vary within the various language skills and sub-skills (i.e. intra-learner variation), (Mathews & Horne, 2006).

It goes without saying that teaching a skill is more challenging than imparting facts. In a content course, a set of facts can be successfully taught and learned in one class-period. In a skill course, on the other hand, it may take days to get the students learn one linguistic form or structure. Not all the students learn all that is taught all the time. After the initial teaching, feedback and remedial teaching of a certain language form, the students may vary in their achievement due to the multitude of factors listed above.

A Brief Review of Some Solutions

As Bremner (2008) says, multi-level classes are a universal phenomenon. The students are put together in a class according to the year of study regardless of the proficiency level in EFL. Classes where the students vary in their ages are not uncommon. Researchers (e.g. Butterworth, 2010) agree that teachers are not prepared to deal with such classes. Neither pre-service nor in-service training programs equip EFL teachers with the skills and techniques needed to teach multi-level classes, (Jorgensen, 2006). Perera (2010) adds the fact that the teacher's manual does not help in this regard and the textbooks are not designed to address the needs of different learners. Thus, the teachers are on their own. The solutions proposed to address the problem are usually a list of recommendations at the end of some research reports and reference books. Al-Shammakhi (2013), for instance, believes that EFL teachers target the average student. Of course, this is not a solution since the other students - both good and weak - become frustrated and de-motivated. Furthermore, there is variation even among the average students, especially in large classes. The teachers may follow the textbook which is usually designed on the basis of what is covered in the previous courses irrespective of the varying levels of the students. Solutions such as the development of additional teaching materials for advanced students, increasing teaching hours (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2005), and streaming (i.e. grouping the students according to their levels) are not feasible in many EFL contexts where the students have to study at least five other courses or subjects in addition to the language course, (for more information about the problems of streaming see e.g. McMillan & Joyce, 2011).

Some researchers (e.g. Mathews & Horne, 2006) believe that the problem of mixed-levels can be addressed by varying the teaching techniques and styles. Variation of teaching techniques is recommended even if a language class consists of a small number of homogeneous students to take care of the different learning styles. However, if the teachers are not trained, they

cannot give what they do not have. Moreover, in most EFL teaching contexts teachers are obliged to follow the prescribed textbooks that are not designed to cater for multi-level classes as we stated earlier. 'Differentiated', 'individualized' or 'personalized' instruction is another solution proposed by some researchers, (e.g. Nordlund, 2003; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2005; Salli-Copur, 2005). According to Tomlinson (1999, p. 24), "children already come to us differentiated. It just makes sense that we would differentiate our instruction in response to them." In another article, Tomlinson (1995, p.2) explains that "a differentiated classroom offers a variety of learning options designed to tap into different levels, interests and learning profiles." However, in addition to the problem of teacher training and textbooks discussed above, there is the problem of large classes in most EFL classrooms where it is normal to find more than 30 students. In the face of such factors, differentiation or individualization of instruction is only wishful thinking as Mahmoud (2012) says. None of the solutions discussed above seems to work in EFL situations where classes are large, textbooks are designed on the basis of coverage rather than on learning, and the teachers are not equipped with the necessary strategies and techniques to deal with such classes.

Leaner-centered Group Work

Many researchers (e.g. Bremner, 2008; Hess, 2001; Morris, 2008) believe that the problem of multi-level classes can be alleviated by group work. They agree that language instructors who adopt a teacher-centered approach face difficulties in multi-level classes. Involving the students in the teaching-learning process through group work is recommended as a means of addressing the variation in the students' levels. Teachers need to encourage the students to work together and interact with each other to facilitate learning. Students can act as teaching assistants. Thus, group work makes it possible to implement some important educational principles such as problem-solving, critical thinking, independent learning, learning the strategies of learning and using various social and cognitive learning and communication strategies. Group work should foster cooperation rather than competition. Needless to say, group work poses some challenges related to class time, the physical setting (space, seating, movement, etc.), class control and use of the first language, (Al-Badi, 2006). According to Al-Badi, EFL teachers tend to avoid group work even if it is recommended by the course designer. This means they would never think of doing it out of their own free will. However, from the present researcher's experience in teaching EFL at the university level, such problems do not exist in teaching adults. When some students use the first language, it is usually for purposes related to the completion of the task such as asking for assistance and giving instructions and explanations to each other.

Thus, from the foregoing brief review, group work appears to be a sensible course of action to address the problem of multi-level EFL classes, especially in higher education institutions where the learners are responsible and mature enough to work together and reap the benefits of cooperation. However, although group work constitutes a shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach to EFL instruction, teacher intervention needs to be reduced even further for more effective learning. The purpose of this study is to explore the possibility of achieving more learner-centeredness by relegating more responsibilities to the

adult learners until the teacher becomes almost redundant, (Weimar, 2013). A brief definition of the concept of learner-centeredness is in order in this connection. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 293), it is "a belief that attention to the nature of the learners should be central of all aspect of language teaching including planning, teaching and evaluation." It aims at creating a learning atmosphere which "de-emphasizes the role of the teacher and stresses process over product as students take control over their own learning," (Fahraeus, 2013, p..1), (see also Blumberg, 2008; Sarigoz, 2008; Weimar, 2013 for similar definitions). Thus, learner-centeredness entails delegating more responsibilities to the students and allowing them to play a more active role in making decisions and in participating in the teaching-learning process.

In traditional group work, teachers specify the language task to be completed, divide the students into pairs or groups based either on their seating or on their abilities and give instruction as to what to do and how to do it. A good student is usually appointed as a group leader. The task is usually a grammar, vocabulary or spelling exercise or contest included in the textbook or in the teacher's manual. Traditional group work is teacher-centered because the teacher is in control of some key arrangements such as the formation of groups and the appointment of group leaders. Moreover, the decision to do or not to do group work is not based on the students' views about this technique; it is made either by the teacher or the course designer. The students may not be allowed to use the first language or to interact across groups. The use of the first language is believed to be at the expense of learning the foreign language and cross-group interaction is seen as disturbance.

Adopting a pragmatic approach based on the present researcher's experience in teaching EFL at the university level, this study is intended to propose some measures whereby group work can be made more learner-centered. The more learner-centered group work becomes, the less demanding it is for the teacher and the more beneficial it is for the students. The techniques and ideas presented in the following sections are based on the views and attitudes of 206 male and female 6th and 7th semester university students majoring in EFL at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). It is the policy of SQU to have the students evaluate each course at the end of the semester. The evaluation tool is an electronic questionnaire consisting of an objective section and an open-ended one. The objective section of the course evaluation tool includes questions about the teaching materials, the teacher's punctuality, the use of audio-visual aids, course assignments, tests and examinations, feedback, and the teacher personality and competence. The subjective section consists of three open-ended questions about what the students like and do not like most in the course and any suggestions to improve the course. In addition to specialised courses in language teaching and learning the present writer teaches and essay writing course and five different English-Arabic-English translation courses. He uses group work in teaching these courses. For the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on the students' responses to the open-ended questions in the evaluation of four translation courses in three consecutive semesters, that is, each course was evaluated by three groups of 20-25 students each semester. All of the students who responded to the questions (206 out of 247 – 83%) said what they liked most was

the group work and the instructor's way of teaching the course. The remaining students (17%) either did not do the evaluation or did not answer the open-ended questions. The high percentage of favorable responses (83%) could be attributed to the greater role and freedom given to the students by taking the cognitive, social and psychological aspect of group work into account. Hence, the students' positive attitude towards group work gave impetus to this study.

The teaching-evaluation cycle continues by ploughing the students' views and suggestions back into the instructional strategies. The students are involved in making decisions about the mode of delivery by taking their views into account not only through the formal course evaluation at the end of the semester but also through informal chats with them during the semester. Regarding the group work itself, an important departure from the traditional arrangement is to let the students form pairs and groups by themselves with some flexibility regarding the number of the students in a group. The size of the group can range from only two to five or six students. It is important for the students to know that they are free to choose who they want to work with. This freedom constitutes an important socio-psychological factor leading to stress-free cooperation where the students eagerly assist each other and accept assistance. It is axiomatic that the students may not be ready help or be helped unless they accept each other in the first place and have the desire to work together. The instructions pertaining to group formation are given only at the beginning of the semester. Thus, the teacher's intervention in the formation of groups is kept to the minimum.

The traditional practice of appointing a group leader reinforces the idea of streaming and discrimination and therefore has to be abandoned. The feeling of inferiority may prohibit weak students from participation. Some good students also may not be ready to cooperate if they feel they are precluded from leadership. When there is no leader, the feeling of equality can motivate all members to participate. If the work of the group is to be presented to the whole class, it can be done by the teacher to keep the group anonymous to encourage its members to complete the task and not worry about their mistakes being exposed to the other students. Anonymity can also encourage the group to reflect on and discuss their own work with the class. It also helps the class focus on the work rather than the group who did it. To foster the spirit of cooperation rather than competition, the groups can feel free to interact with each other when they deem it necessary. For instance, a group or a member of it can help or seek help from an adjacent group or a member of it. The use of the first language by foreign language learners is a part of the classroom culture. If it is not used openly, it is there in the learners' minds as a source of linguistic knowledge that is relied upon in the hope of facilitating foreign language comprehension and production, (Mahmoud, 2012). The phenomenon is beyond the teacher's control and any attempt at banning it would be futile. Instead, this additional linguistic source can be utilized in the foreign language classroom for good reasons. The students may be allowed to resort the first language to save time and ensure comprehension when giving instructions and explanations as stated earlier.

The steps discussed above regarding group formation, leadership, cross-group interaction and the use of the first language are some of the general principles that apply to group work in all EFL courses and skills. There are, of course, some other course-specific measures that can be taken depending on the nature of the course. For instance, the students may have more freedom in creative writing than in translation. From the present researcher's experience, the students can be involved in the choice of the topics they want to write about within a specified writing mode such as argumentation. The teacher can compile a list of argumentative topics suggested by the students and have them write about the most common ones. In translation, on the other hand, the texts are selected by the teacher to ensure coverage of a wide range of text types and genres. In writing, the brain-storming stage can be learner-centered by engaging the students in an oral debate to generate points in favor of and against the topic in question (e.g. the pros and cons of the social media). In translation, the students read the text and work together to figure out the meanings of the unfamiliar words and expressions and assist each other in global and detailed comprehension of the text. The production phase in both writing and translation is almost the same. Both tasks have to be process oriented where the students work together to solve problems of spelling, grammar, vocabulary and cohesion and review each others drafts. The two tasks may differ in the provision of feedback due to the difference in the nature of the tasks and the length of the texts produced. The translation text can be short (5 – 10 lines) or long (20 – 25 lines) but divided into pieces for each group to translate a piece. In this case, the last 10-15 minutes of the class can be spared for the presentation and discussion of each translation. For this purpose, the present writer asks each group to write their translation on a transparency to facilitate presentation. Such presentation and discussion may not be possible in essay writing due to time limitations. Of course, some writing and translation tasks have to be done individually in class and some at home for the students to gauge their levels and to rehearse for the tests and examinations.

Conclusion

Multi-level language classes are a universal phenomenon and pose a formidable challenge to both first language and foreign language teachers. Most of the solutions proposed to address the problem are ivory tower recommendations listed at the end of research reports. These recommendations cannot be translated into practical operational measures, otherwise they could have been included in pre-service or in-service teacher training programs. Adopting a pragmatic approach, this study reviewed some of these solutions and focused on group work as a reasonable course of action. The purpose of the study was to take group work a step further and make it more learner-centered. To that end, some general arrangements were suggested whereby EFL learners could be given more freedom and control over the teaching-learning process in the hope of making group more effective in adult multi-level classes. The decision to do group work has to based on the students' attitudes about it. The students can form their own pairs and groups and work together without a group leader or choose a leader by themselves. They can also interact with the other groups and use the first language for the purpose of completing the task. The ideas and practices discussed in this study were based on the researcher's experience in teaching essay writing and translation at the university level. In addition to the general

arrangements and principles of group work, course-specific measures can be taken to achieve more learner-centeredness. Examples of such measures were given with reference to essay writing and translation. Judgments about the effectiveness of the general and course-specific techniques were based on the high percentage of responses in favor of group work in the course evaluation. It goes without say that EFL teachers have to be equipped with some realistic tips that can encourage them to use group work. Pre-service and in-service training programs need to include practical learner-centered techniques and measures such as the ones described in this paper. EFL teachers and specialists can think of ways of conducting learner-centered group work in teaching other language skills (e.g. reading, speaking, etc.). Further research is needed to verify the findings of this study before they can be generalized. In an experimental study, the learner-centered techniques proposed in the study can be compared with those of   traditional group work.

About the author:
Dr Mahmoud is a professor of Applied Linguistics. He teaches courses in ELT methods and curriculum, foreign language learning, and English-Arabic-English translation. He is interested in classroom-oriented research in TEFL. He published numerous papers in national, regional and international journals. He is a member of the editorial board of several regional and international journals.

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