Challenges and Strategies in Teaching English to Heterogeneous Classes: A Case Study

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Abstract

Heterogeneous classes, also known as mixed-ability classes, in English competency have been threatening to teachers of English at State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya. The effects of teaching English to the heterogeneous classes at Polytechnic of Sriwijaya have been a calling for this study to provide suggesting solutions for the English teachers in this institution. Using purposive sampling, there were eight teachers of English who participated in this study. They were grouped into teachers of English who taught in: (1) engineering departments; and (2) commerce departments. The collected data via individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results revealed that there was frequency in the case of challenges like students' different learning styles and interest, teaching and learning materials as well as its methodology in teaching the heterogeneous classes which, in turned, needed appropriate solutions. The most effective solutions in handling the heterogeneous classes in English learning were applying differentiated instructions, and appropriate classroom management. However, these solutions did not relate to the departments where the teachers of English placed. In fact, student-centered approach is the best strategy in this situation.

Keywords: English learning, heterogeneous classes, mixed-ability classes, polytechnics

Introduction

Having students with mixed-English abilities in one class is one of the most challenging problem faced by teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class at schools. This typical EFL class is also known as *mixed-proficiency* or *heterogeneous* class in which, in one EFL class, the students as the English learners consist of mixed-English proficiency. Their English proficiencies are various, some of them are slow in learning English while others are fast. Chen (2015) argued that the heterogeneous English ability condition takes place due to the requirement approach of the students in the schools. The approach resulted the students from previous diverse schools with various learning aspects, such as: background, learning styles, intelligence, and English knowledge and English learning experience (Bremner, 2008; Londres, 2017; Prema, 2016; Ur, 2005). Consequently, the processes of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the EFL classes are influenced by the presence of this various learning abilities. Based on some studies, the teachers of English are reported to have difficulties in pedagogy and developing learning materials in order to handle all levels of their students' English proficiency in their EFL classes (Hallam, Roger, & Ireson, 2008; Harris & Snow, 2004; Scrivener, 200; Van der Veer, 2007).

Furthermore, some studies regarding EFL heterogeneous classes have been conducted by Alasrtair (2014), Londres (2017), and Svard (2006) in high school level, and followed by Al-Subaiei (2017) and Anitha (2018) in university level. Their studies revealed that English

heterogeneous classes is a big consideration for teachers of English. Heterogeneous classes provide difficulties in focusing who the target learner is. On one hand, focusing on the slow learners will let their fast counterparts get bored in learning as they are able to complete the tasks earlier and have to wait for the next activities. On the other hand, focusing on the fast learners will let the slower learner feel demotivated and confused as they left behind in understanding the English learning material in class. Regarding English lesson in higher vocational education/polytechnics, English is taught as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Vocational Purposes (EVP). The students learn English in their study majors, i.e.: engineering majors and commerce majors. The fact that they were tested for their English competency as entering requirement, the score of the entering test is not for placing them in accordance to their English competency level but for entering requirement only. Hence, the teachers of English in polytechnic must deal with English heterogeneous classes. Having this situation, this study is conducted to investigate the answers of these two following questions. First, what are the challenges in teaching English to heterogeneous classes in a higher vocational institution (Polsri) faced by teachers of English in engineering and commerce majors? Second, it is also intended to answer what strategies are utilized by the teacher in order to cope with the challenges?

Literature Review

Research from some scholars have defined the term *heterogeneous* in English class in different perspectives. For example, Ur (2005) defined it as an English class with not only beginner, intermediate, and advance learners but also with various learning aspects of the learners' like learning styles, levels of motivation, and age. Xanthou and Pavlou (2008) defined it as an class of high, medium, and low English-abilities students which provides more opportunities in learning English as they can facilitate each other in learning processes. In addition, Marcia (2009) mentioned that the heterogeneous situation made the teachers of English to focus both on their students learning aspects like learning activities and teaching approaches. However, other scholars referred the heterogeneous class as a creativity source for the teachers to create English learning materials for their students as well as the teaching approach (Blaz, 2015; Chen, 2015; Londres, 2017).

Advantages and disadvantages

In fact, the existing students' varied abilities in an English class conveys two sides in the form of its advantages and disadvantages. On one side, Chen (2015), Marcia (2009), Xanthou and Pavlou (2008), Ur (2005), and Wallstrom (2012) in their studies revealed that both teachers and students are beneficial from this situation. The teachers have more opportunities to design English teaching and learning materials together with the strategies on how to apply the designed materials. Moreover, the students have more collaborative learning activities to enhance their English language skills. The fast learners could sharpen their language skills by assisting their slow counterparts and it will advantage the slow ones as well to comprehend the taught material. Indeed, this collaboration will increase both knowledge and respects among them. On the other side, nevertheless, there are some potential threatening for both teachers and students reported by the following scholars. Londres (2017) in her study claimed that the condition of heterogeneous hinders the fast learners to focus on their learning processes. This happens because they have to share their attention in assisting their slow counterparts in learning processes. Having labeling on students based on their levels of English proficiencies (beginner/intermediate/advance or slow/fast leaners), (Marcia, 2009) argued that it undermines personal and social outcomes, especially for lowest level learners because they are regarded as slow learners or incompetent to catch up the learning processes.

Furthermore, teachers of English are determined because they have to understand various strategies in teaching English due to the various or graded proficiencies of their learners

(Bernabas, 2011; Kwie, 2017; Mayer, 2008). In fact, developing graded English teaching and learning materials is very demanding in time and budget. Summarizing from some studies above, it can be concluded that there are pros and contrasts in English heterogeneous class as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Pros and contras in heterogeneous 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

*Adopted from: Gustiani (2019)

Student's learning style

Most EFL classes at schools are inhabited of a large number of students as the English learners. These students are, obviously, defined by their learning styles as their preferences to learn English as their target language (Harris & Snow, 2004). It is crucial that teachers have to control their students learning activities in order to cater all students' needs of learning effectiveness. In order to do so, the teachers need to adjust and develop not only the learning materials but also the approaches to deliver them in the class. The failure in catering the students' different needs in learning style and strategies could result dissatisfaction and shortage in English learning (Blaz, 2018; Harris & Snow, 2004; Northcote, 2006). Adjusting and developing teaching and learning materials to a heterogeneous class are challenging. It needs the greatest creativity of English teachers to keep all their students engage during the learning processes. The materials must be able to stimulate all levels of cognitive work in the class. It must develop learning intellectual of slow learners as well as keep the fast learner busy with the same materials, but different tasks. Teachers can vary the materials using authentic materials or from internet, and prepare extra activities to avoid boredom for the fast learners when they complete the tasks earlier than the slow one. Certainly, teachers need to spare more time to create this such well-planned teaching and learning materials (Alastair, 2014; Londre, 2016; Prema, 2016; Scriever, 2005; Ur, 2005; Van der Veer, 2007).

Learning materials

Teaching the same English learning materials without different tasks to students with various English proficiencies impacts their motivations in learning. The challenge is that teachers of English need keeping up with all interest levels of the English learners during the teaching and learning processes. Fast learners would be trapped in boredom if the tasks are too easy and fail to provoke their intellectual learning. Meanwhile, their counterparts would be demotivated in learning and fail to develop their learning abilities as they have too hard materials. Teachers who incompetent to motivate their students in learning will put them to the innermost potential learning abilities since motivation and achievement are strongly related (Anitha, 2018; Bremner, 2008; Lewis, Collier, Annie, 2012; Londres, 2017; Svard, 2006; Ur, 2005; Wallstrom, 2012). Additionally, the methodology in delivering English learning materials is also important and

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requires assorted teaching approaches to accommodate the students' needs. According to Blaz (2016) learners reach their learning goals when the teachers employ some teaching and learning approaches to facilitate their learning. Related to English heterogeneous classes, (Bremner, 2008; Hallam, 2008; Wallstrom, 2012) stated that teachers of English are required to control their learners who have mixed English proficiencies, equally, to motivate and engage in the lesson. They have to manage that fast learners to have tasks above their intellectual level tasks without neglecting the slow ones. Certainly, dealing with various levels of proficiencies while enhancing individual's motivation and interest in learning are not an easy approach to do (Dimas & Costellanos, 2014; Londre, 2016).

Teaching strategies

The truth that a heterogeneous class is very challenging invented some scholars to propose *differentiated instruction* as a recommended teaching methodology to overcome it. Blaz (2015), Pospisilova (2008), and Tomlinson (2001) defined it as a teaching strategy which carters the needs of various learning styles. Likewise, Londre (2016) defined this teaching strategy as *customized lessons* or *varying instruction*. She argued that instructions in using this strategy must be customized or varied based on the learners' abilities in order to trigger their cognitive processes and enhance their learning styles. Following the previous scholars, Blaz (2015) suggested some techniques to apply this strategy appropriately: (1) identifying students' learning styles; (2) adjusting students' needs; and (3) facilitating different learning styles. In its implementation this strategy is best suited to students-centered activities, like: collaborative tasks, tiered tasks, and compulsory plus optional tasks because they responsibility to their own learning processes. Collaborative tasks required all English learners to contribute their thoughts through discussion in which the fast learners assist their counterpart and facilitate the discussion (Bremner, 2008; Marcia, 2009). Tiered tasks divide the learners into various groups with suitable activities for each group, and the answers are discussed after tasks completed (Bowler & Parminter, 2002). Compulsory plus optional tasks provide all learners with sense of learning achievement because the slow learners can complete the compulsory while the fast ones are not being delayed as they are busy doing the optional task after finishing the compulsory (Chen, 2015; Ur, 2005). Other student-centered approaches like game competition, extra homework, and dramatization could be integrated to enhance the effectiveness of ELT processes in a heterogeneous class. These strategies will be best help to address the challenges in heterogeneous class when coupled with proper supporting teaching and learning aids, such as audio-visual facilities and classroom management (Pedersen & Kronborg, 2014).

Moreover, creating a good atmosphere or learning environment in the form of good classroom management is also an important strategy. Wright (2005) claimed good classroom environment and good behavior management are related to create a good learning situation. The difference in levels of English proficiency potentially develops undesirable behaviors among students like anxiety or superiority. Tomlinson (2001) in her book proposed some characteristics of effective learning environment, e.g.: students feel save and welcomed to contribute their opinion, students have mutual respects regardless to their proficiency, and teacher teaches for students' success and academic growth. So far, to the best the researcher's knowledge, there is no previous research dealing with challenges and strategies in handling heterogeneous class in teaching ESP/EVP in a higher vocational education/polytechnic context. Hence, this research is conducted to meet the gap.

Methods
Research design

This research is a case study using a qualitative approach. The qualitative design was chosen because this method focusses on phenomena exploration via the data in the form of

words, stories, and pictures (Creswell, 2012). Gillham (2000) said It enabled the researcher to understand the meaning of the gained phenomena and illuminated the issues as well as offer possible explanation. The rationale for having a case study was that this research quested an in-depth exploration from many perspectives of the complexity regarding challenges faced by teachers of English at State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya (Polsri) in teaching their classes which consisted of students with mixed-English proficiencies/heterogeneous and their strategies to cope with the challenges.

Research site and participants

This research was conducted in Polytechnic of Sriwijaya because it was purposively chosen based on the purpose of the study (Bryman, 2012). It was to explore the challenges faced by the teachers of English in higher vocational education, in which they taught English at engineering departments and commerce departments. They were teaching English to their heterogeneous classes in both departments and using strategies to cope with the challenges. As aforementioned, these teachers had to deal with students with various English proficiencies in one class. This indicates that the condition faced by these teachers was unique and may serve as distinguishing in terms of teachers' teaching challenges.

There were eight teachers of English at Polytechnic of Sriwijaya who were chosen as sample (named as 'participants' afterward) out of 24 teachers of English. They were identified as Participant 1/P1, P2, P3, and P4 as teachers of English in engineering majors, and P5, P6, P7, and P8 in commerce majors. They were purposively chosen due to two following characteristics. Firstly, they were teaching in engineering majors or commerce majors. Secondly, they were pre-service training teachers who had education and training in teaching English before undertaking their teaching at Polytechnic of Sriwijaya and graduated from master program. Meaning all participants had equal teaching education and education background. Having these characteristics, this research applied purposive sampling where the researchers "intentionally selects individuals and sites to learn or to understand the central phenomena" (Creswell, 2012, p.206). Selection of the participants was conducted via direct contact.

Data collection and analysis

This study employed two methods of interview in collecting the data: (1) individual in-depth interview using semi-structured interview questions; and (2) focus group interview (FGI). Both interviews were focused on two keys issues: exploring the challenges in teaching English to heterogeneous classes, and exploring the strategies to deal with the challenges. Individual in-depth interview, as argued by Creswell (2012), is a form of one-by-one interview to provide comfortable interviews for participants. This interview conducted by the researcher to the participants in order to provide comfortable situation during the interviews to have the best answers.

The semi-structured interview questions about challenges and strategies of English heterogeneous classes was adapted and developed from Al-Subaiei (2017). As a semi-structured interview, it provided probing questions in flexible ways to allow participants of the study to answer the interview questions and deliberate the relevant topics in their own way and using their own words (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The researcher played the role as the interviewer and facilitator by asking questions while facilitating the participants or the interviewees to answer the questions regarding challenges they faced in teaching English to heterogeneous classes at Polsri and strategies to cope with the challenges. The interviewees answered the questions via their own perspectives and their chosen words and language. The focus group interview was conducted in a group of eight participants (all participants in individual interview) which intended to gather more information and perspectives which were not necessarily available through one-on-one

interview (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). Both individual and focus group interviews lasted about 30-45 minutes and all were audio-recorded.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. A process of segmentation, categorization and relinking of aspects of the data prior to final. Furthermore, the procedures of the analysis were adopted from Matthews and Ross (2010) using 4 main steps: (1) identifying initial themes; (2) developing categories; (3) looking for relationship across the emerging themes; and (4) presenting the data.

Findings

Question 1: What are the challenges in teaching English to heterogeneous classes in a higher vocational institution Polytechnic of Sriwijaya faced by teachers of English in engineering and commerce majors?

All participants agreed that there were challenges in students' different learning styles and interest, teaching and learning materials as well as its methodology in teaching their heterogeneous classes either in engineering or commerce majors. Each challenge will be explained as follow. First, learning styles were referred as preferred strategies in acquiring information. Regarding students' learning styles in learning English at Polytechnic of Sriwijaya, all participants reported that their English heterogeneous classes have various learning styles which related to students' English proficiencies. P4 mentioned that his students learning styles were varied based on their abilities.

> Some English students in my engineering classes are very noisy and active when learning [English], they want to show that they can do and finish the tasks earlier…but, [other] students who are very silent in learning, passive and very slow in completing their tasks, I need to assist them, to finish the tasks (P4).

Supported by P7 and P8 in FGI, they said that they had to facilitate all learning styles in their heterogeneous class in commerce majors to avoid learning failure. P7 said,

> I need to provide different tasks, like discussion, drama…game competition…they can be learned by all students via their individual strategies, otherwise only some will follow and understand the lesson (P7).

Second, students' interest is defined as their motivation and participation in learning processes. Due to various English proficiencies in their heterogeneous classes, 5 participants (P1, P3, P4, P6, P7) stated that students' levels of interest in learning English in both majors was closely related to the levels of learning materials.

> If I give the same learning materials with the same tasks, it will influence their motivation. Difficult tasks for less able students will make them frustration in doing the tasks and easily lost the interest…because they don't understand. And more able students will feel unaffordable in learning if the tasks are too easy for them…finish soon, get bored, and find compensation to kill it [the boredom] (P1).

Indeed, the situation affects the students' potential learning, which in turn, influences their English achievement. P6 mentioned it as follow in FGI.

> Strong learners [of English] might take it for granted, because they can complete the tasks faster, …and they are not challenged to learn harder, because they think they will have an A later on. In contrast, weak learners who are demotivated, because they get frustration in learning, will left behind, do not participate in learning and lead to low achievement (P6).

Third, English teaching and learning materials are reported very challenging by all participants. P2 and P5 said that the challenge was how to make the students have the same learning experiences with different proficiencies.

> Designing English materials for my mixed abilities classes is not easy, it must enable all students to activate their brains, share the same involvement, while in the same time keep engaging in the materials with their different abilities (P2).

Furthermore, P1, P3, and P8 agreed that designing the materials is very time consuming and need creativity because they need to plan it very well to address all students' needs.

> I need to search many sources to prepare different activities for catering all levels of proficiencies, interesting materials, not only the need of one level, make all busy learning with interesting materials…it is not we teach, but what they learn (P8).

Finally, the methodology in delivering teaching and learning materials in heterogeneous classes requires the teachers to comprehend a wide range of strategies according to P2, P4, P5, P7, and P8. They must be able to accommodate equally all learning styles and levels proficiencies of the learners, regardless the majors. The role is to optimize all levels of abilities while enhance individual's learning confidence.

> We are super teachers…[laughing]…because we must teach all students while care their individual's need (P3 in FGI).

However, all participants during their FGI admitted that when they had no time in preparing proper materials, they teach in average level and tried to combine all strategies they remembered. This indicates that in actual condition, heterogeneous classes sharpen teachers' creativity in designing teaching and learning materials and expose them to various teaching methodologies.

Question 2: What strategies are utilized by the teacher in order to cope with the challenges?

The fact that all teachers see their heterogeneous class as a challenging class, it creates the creativeness for them to find the solution as the way to cope with the challenges. There were two strongest strategies revealed: differentiated instruction, and classroom management. Firstly, differentiated instruction encompasses the methods of teaching and learning, and its materials, so that the participants could eliminate the impacts of the existed challenges. Almost all participants in two majors varied their instructions based on their students' proficiencies using tiered tasks, or collaborative tasks.

> I made adjustment to the instructions of the tasks from the same material in my teaching approach, they [the students] keep studying in their own level of proficiencies. It's kind of tiered activities in which every layer of the students' levels of proficiencies have suitable activities in accord to their English proficiencies, and they have fun (P4).
>
> Collaborative work is very powerful to facilitate differences, because all students have some portion to complete the tasks. They even help each other, you know, the fast help the slow (P7 in GFI).

Second, classroom management is believed greatly affects students to learn. P2, P4, P5, P6, P8 argued that they have to lead their students in creating a really good classroom management so that they have appropriate attitudes, positive beliefs, and confident to all members of the class in learning. To put the students as the center of the learning processes could optimize their power to their own learning habit.

> Besides teaching the materials, I also create motivating situation to respect and help each other, among them [students], …so everyone feels welcomed and promotes good, strong relationships (P5).

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Table 2 is developed to illustrate the findings.

Table 2. Challenges and Strategies

Themes	Sub-themes
Challenges in Teaching English to Heterogeneous Classes	students' different learning styles students' interest teaching and learning materials teaching and learning methodology
Strategies are Utilized to Cope with the Challenges	differentiated instruction class management

Discussion

The findings have illuminated that teaching English to heterogeneous classes at Polsri posed problems in forms learners' different styles in learning, learners' learning interest, teaching and learning materials as well as its methodology. However, having those challenges have benefited the teachers as well. This is in line with both of the teachers and students develop advantages from a mixed abilities class (Chen, 2015; Marcia, 2009). Regardless the majors, various students' preferred learning ways was related to their English achievement. Participants always search interesting teaching and learning strategies to deliver their materials, so that their students can activate their preferred learning styles in class activities. While facilitating their students' learning ways, they promote their student's achievement as well. Participants not only sharpened their teaching skills, but also enrich their collection of interesting teaching and learning materials. Besides catering students' learning styles, applying appropriate teaching and learning materials as argued by Ur (2005), Wallstrom (2012), Xanthou and Pavlou (2008) enhances students learning interest. Participants who facilitated their students' motivation to learn would boost their learning potential to the most and resulted to better achievement. Furthermore, delivering well planned materials to a heterogeneous class means to adjust the tasks in accordance to the levels of abilities. By exposing their ability in creating the learning materials with adjusted tasks, the participants practiced and sharpened their creativity in designing proper learning material to their heterogeneous classes (Blaz, 2015; Pospisilova, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001).

Adjusting tasks or activities from same learning materials is defined by Londre (2016) as *customized lessons* or *varying instructions*. All participants confirmed that they prepared different instructional material to suit the difference needs of their students. The differentiated tasks challenged every student's cognitive to work, both fast and slow learners (Blaz, 2015). The examples activities like tiered tasks and collaborative tasks cultivate students' respect and positive attitude among them. Fast learners will help their slow counterparts which means *the fast* practiced more their language skills while *the slow* enhanced their understanding toward the learned materials (Bremner, 2008; Marcia, 2009). The teacher's attitude towards helping all students in their learning processes, obviously, develops positive learning atmosphere in classroom. Consequently, the positive learning atmosphere enabled students to experience all learning processes. Indeed, the participants have valued a kind of student-centered approach in their classes. As Tomlinson (2001) and Wright (2005) declared that teaching to a heterogeneous class is not about what the teachers teach, instead how the students learn.

Conclusion and Recommendations/Implications

This study revealed that the challenges faced by teachers of English at Polytechnic of Sriwijaya in teaching their English heterogeneous classes were: the different styles of the learners, learning interest, teaching and learning materials as well as its methodology. These challenges

came both from engineering and commerce majors. They required the teachers of English to apply differentiated instruction and proper classroom management, when they were teaching, which emphasized on students-centered approach. Employing these strategies is crucial as the presence of diverse different levels of proficiencies might result complexities both for teachers and students. However, employing them properly more expose the advantages of teaching a heterogeneous class rather than its disadvantages. All together will ensure the efficiency and effectiveness in the ELT of a heterogeneous class. Further research is highly recommended to conduct this topic in a quantitative way with larger participants. It is expected the quantitative research to unveil more trends and dig deeper the problems. It would also be interesting to listen to perspective of students as the learners and compare teachers and students' perspectives about the same topic.

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