

Teachers' perceptions of students' attitudes in mixed ability EFL state primary school classes

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of mixed ability classes in the context of English as a Foreign Language learning (EFL) in state primary schools of Cyprus. A study was undertaken aiming to uncover EFL teachers' perceptions of students' attitudes in multi-level classes. Both quantitative and qualitative methodology is employed. A Likert-type questionnaire was administered to 114 EFL teachers, eliciting information on the attitudes of children with and without prior knowledge of English (PKE) in class. Results are compared with in-class observation data. Results demonstrate that students with PKE seem to have different attitudes towards the lesson from their counterparts who do not have PKE. Most teachers find difficulties both with true and false beginners. Suggestions for dealing with the problem are provided such as increasing the EFL teaching time and adopting proper instructional procedures and more appropriate course books.

Keywords: mixed ability, attitudes, false beginners, true beginners, private tuition

1. Introduction

Richards (1998: 1) affirms that “every class we ever teach is mixed ability”. Every learner has his/her own learning style and linguistic background knowledge. In English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) settings of state primary schools in Cyprus, a great number of students are considered false beginners (Richards, Platt and Weber, 1985). Some of them have already been exposed to English language instruction in private institutions for at least one year and some others may have English-speaking parents while several students are true beginners having almost no structural and lexical knowledge of the foreign language. The problem becomes more complicated as some children learn more easily while others progress very slowly (Hess 2002, Santopietro 1991). This paper explores the current mixed ability situation in EFL classrooms in state primary schools of Cyprus, focusing on the EFL teachers' perceptions of students' attitudes in mixed ability classes as these might be affected by whether or not they possess previous knowledge of English (henceforth PKE). Both quantitative and qualitative methodology is employed. A Likert type questionnaire was administered to

114 EFL teachers, examining their experiences and views on students' attitudes in mixed ability EFL classes. Information was elicited on how children with and without PKE behave in class. Results are compared with in-class observation data.

2. Multilevel EFL classes

Salli-Copur (2005: 1) affirms that "EFL language classes are mixed ability classes" . They begin with varied levels of competence and previous exposure to the foreign language. Learners do not share the same language background (Bell 2004, Prodromou 1995). For instance, in Cyprus, pupils enter the primary school EFL course at grade 4 (nine years old) with either much or little prior foreign language knowledge (Xanthou and Pavlou in press).

The differences in language experiences and learning ability can be a challenge for the teacher to overcome. Students in multilevel classrooms can become independent learners as well as partners in learning. They can learn from one another's strengths, and therefore develop learning communities (Johnson and Johnson 1987, Manlove and Baker 1995, Yogman and Kaylani 1996). However, the teachers need to be aware of the possible problems that may arise in heterogeneous classes (Ur 1996). For instance, Boyd and Boyd (1989) report that learners with advanced skills may become bored whereas students with limited proficiency skills may become frustrated.

As Şalli-Çopur (2005) indicates, the language teachers should identify the source of troubles in their class and cure them. The major problem that is generated from this situation is that some learners are advanced and always participate in the classroom taking many turns, while others show indifference and may not speak for the entire lesson. The first group of children may even "lose interest in the class" while the latter quit, (Prodromou 1995: 3) feeling disappointed and therefore refusing to participate. Low level students may feel that they lack the specific semantic and grammatical knowledge. Furthermore, textbooks may not accommodate the needs of a diverse class population. Several textbooks are designed for a homogeneous classroom; as a result, a number of students may lose interest in the textbook as it is too difficult for them while others may find it extremely easy. It is the teacher's duty to consider the appropriacy of teaching materials for the EFL mixed ability class (MAC). Disruption of discipline is another serious problem that could be created in the multilevel class. Fast finishers carry out their tasks before their classmates. In this context, weak learners either lose their confidence or disrupt discipline as they cannot respond as quickly as their counterparts.

3. The present study

The current study is the second part of a study undertaken by Xanthou and Pavlou (in press). The aim of that study was to investigate the level of linguistic diversity in the EFL classrooms of state primary schools in Cyprus at the outset of the EFL course at grade 4 (nine-year-olds) by administering grammar and vocabulary tests to level 1 pupils of state EFL classes. The findings showed a great linguistic diversity in the EFL state primary school classes. The one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect ($p = .00$) of private institutional instruction on grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The pupils who attended private EFL classes prior the state primary school course, performed significantly higher than their counterparts who started the course without PKE. The different language levels in the EFL class are assumed to create a context which might affect students' attitudes towards foreign language learning.

The purpose of the current study is to explore the issue of mixed ability EFL classes investigating the teachers' views and experiences regarding students' attitudes in EFL classes. The teachers' views on the topic are examined and compared with in-class observation data in order to provide more details on the various aspects which are discussed.

3.1 Educational context

Children in Cyprus attend primary school at the age of five years and eight months on or before September first of the school year they start school (Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus, 2004). Primary education in Cyprus lasts six years and Standard Modern Greek is the language of instruction in the state schools of the Greek Cypriot community of Cyprus.

English is the only foreign language currently taught in primary schools. It is introduced in the fourth year exposing 9-year-old children to English for two 40-minute periods per week. A significant number of children take private lessons in the afternoon. A survey undertaken by Xanthou and Pavlou (in press) revealed that 40% of *the* one hundred participants did not attend any private classes while 60% of them had already attended one to three years of private instruction. This situation suggests that level 1 pupils, that is, beginners, have different language levels that may affect their attitudes towards foreign language learning.

4. Research methodology

A Likert-type questionnaire was administered to 114 EFL teachers, examining their experiences and views on 9-year-old primary school students' attitudes in mixed ability EFL classes of state schools. Information was elicited on how children with and without prior knowledge of English (PKE) behave in class. Results are compared with in-class observation data to ensure triangulation of data. Mortimore in Cohen and Manion (2000: 239) also suggests the use of "triangular techniques if a more holistic view of educational outcomes is sought".

4.1 Research

Teachers were expected to express the view that students attending private classes prior to state school EFL instruction at the age of 9 years old perform significantly better than true beginners. Teachers were also expected to provide more details about how this situation creates problems in the EFL class such as increasing the self-confidence and participation of students with prior language knowledge while simultaneously decreasing the self-confidence of students without language experiences.

4.2 Research Tools

A questionnaire was administered to one hundred and fourteen EFL state primary school teachers (Appendix). This study includes the questions referring to the teachers' views about students' attitudes in the multilevel EFL class. The items of the questionnaire were based on the findings of a pilot study in the form of semi-structured interviews (Bell 1999: 132). The teachers selected for the pilot interviews were working at two large urban and two rural schools.

In-class observation data were held twice a week for six 40-minute lessons lasting one month (October 2005). The particular class being observed was a grade 4 primary school class of an urban school, including 25 nine-year-old children, of whom 16 attended private English classes prior to starting the state EFL course whereas 9 children were true beginners. The class included 11 boys and 14 girls. Students were of different ability levels ranging from high to poor achievers according to their teacher's reports. Seven of the children were high achievers, eight children were very good, six pupils had a fair performance, and four learners were low achievers.

Information on the attitudes of advanced and low ability students was gathered in an observation chart. A participant observation was carried out as the teacher who was

teaching the lesson also took notes after the lessons. Comments derived from observations were expected to supplement the questionnaire findings in the form of percentages.

4.3 The teachers' profile

Ninety-five of the teachers who completed the questionnaires were females whereas nineteen were males. Seventy-eight of them were working in an urban school while 36 were working in a rural school. The participants had a teaching experience ranging from 3 to 17 years. Only 25 of them had a professional qualification in EFL teaching such as a TESOL diploma and an MA in TESOL. The others are teachers who were offered pre-service and in-service training in the area of EFL teaching.

5. Results

Teachers were asked to assess the impact of students' linguistic level on their ability to get involved in the lesson (Table 1).

Table 1. Teachers' assessment of students' negative influence on the lesson in relation to their linguistic level

	<i>True Beginners</i>	<i>False Beginners</i>
Never	3.50%	4.38%
Seldom	23.68%	34.21%
Often	48.24%	40.35%
Very often	21.92%	18.42%
always	2.63%	2.63%

Table 1 shows that most teachers (48.24%) find difficulties more often with true beginners than with false beginners. However, a great number of teachers (40.35%) seem to face problems quite often with false beginners too who tend to disturb the lesson as they may not find interest in it. Class observation has shown that children with and without PKE may equally not participate if the teaching activity is not carefully designed to stimulate them. For example, the 'Listen and repeat' oral activity of the textbook, proved to be a meaningless activity, so both high and low ability students found it uninteresting.

Table 2 illustrates teachers' views on whether students without PKE feel disadvantaged.

Table 2. Teachers' views on whether students without PKE feel disadvantaged

Yes	35.08%
No	0.87%
Depends on the teach. approach	56.14%
Depends on the student	7.89%

The results show that although a great percentage of teachers (35.08%) support the view that true beginners feel disadvantaged, an even greater percentage of them believe that the teaching approach affects students' attitude (56.14%). It can be inferred that proper instructional procedures can affect positively the feelings of students with poor linguistic knowledge. Children without PKE being observed during the EFL lessons felt happy when given the opportunity to provide one-word answers which were accepted, i.e., in oral guessing games and word games.

Teachers reported on how students without PKE behave in class (Table 3).

Table 3. Teachers' evaluation of how students without PKE express their feelings

	<i>Not paying attention</i>	<i>Doing other things</i>	<i>Being afraid to speak</i>
Never	0.87%	4.38%	0%
Seldom	28.94%	31.57%	7.89%
Often	47.36%	45.61%	24.56%
Very often	21.05%	16.66%	50.87%
Always	1.75%	1.75%	16.66%

Most teachers agree that the main problem of these children is their reluctance to speak (50.87% of the teachers note that this happens very often, while 16.66% say that this is always the case). This has also been noted in observational data, especially when the activity required a great amount of lexical and syntactic knowledge. Linguistically weak children may often be inattentive in class (47.36% of the teachers say this happens often and 21.05% very often) as it has also been observed in class, or may do other things (45.61% report that this happens often and 16.66% very often). Such attitude could be attributed to their teachers' failure of engaging all students in the lesson. Time-constraints may not allow teachers to use techniques which could promote cooperative work and task differentiation, e.g., using technology to present or investigate topics, and

thus being more effective for all levels of language performance. Teachers need to use techniques that can actively involve all students in the lesson. Students of low proficiency level should feel free to speak without being afraid of making mistakes.

Teachers reported the comments that students without PKE make in class. These are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Teachers reporting students' (without PKE) comments

	<i>I do not take private lessons</i>	<i>I don't understand</i>	<i>I can't speak</i>	<i>I can't read</i>	<i>I can't write</i>
Never	3.50%	4.38%	0.90%	3.51%	4.38%
Seldom	10.52%	12.28%	19.29%	24.56%	21.92%
Often	40.35%	47.36%	40.35%	40.35%	37.71%
Very often	29.82%	28.94%	32.45%	28.07%	31.57%
Always	15.78%	7.01%	7.01%	3.51%	4.38%

Children most commonly say that they do not take private lessons (15.78% always, 29.82% very often and 40.35% often) and that they do not understand what the teacher says or asks them to do (47.36% report that this happens often). This is also shown in observation data: When children had to work in pairs having to form and answer questions involving the target structure “Yes, s/he is”, “No, s/he isn't” in order to deal with the textbook's oral activity, students without PKE complained they did not understand the instructions given. Moreover, they may complain that they can not speak or read (40.35% of the teachers claim that they do this often) and that they can not write (37.71% report that children do this often and 31.57% very often). Observation data confirmed this situation e.g., when students had to deal with a workbook activity which asked them to form sentences using a particular structure, students without PKE complained they could not write.

These comments suggest that true beginners create a negative image for themselves. They seem to believe that prior knowledge is essential for attending successfully the EFL class in the state school. Observation data illustrates how uncomfortable students without PKE feel when their peers report that they have already learned something in private EFL classes. When the teacher introduced the structure ‘Who's he? Is s/he a...? Yes, s/he is’, students with PKE reported they had learned this in private EFL lessons while students without PKE felt uncomfortable

Table 5. Teachers' responses to students' comments

	<i>Assure learners they are going to be taught what is required from them</i>	<i>Inform learners that material is part of what is demanded from them</i>	<i>Ask learners to work in pairs</i>	<i>Provide differentiated work</i>
Never	0.87%	7.01%	0%	0.87%
Seldom	1.75%	28.07%	1.75%	20.17%
Often	31.57%	34.21%	34.21%	41.22%
Very often	35.96%	21.92%	40.35%	26.31%
Always	29.82%	8.77%	23.68%	11.40%

A great percentage of teachers assure learners they are going to teach them what they need to know rather than inform them that the material is part of what is demanded from them (28.07% do this seldom, 34.21% do this often and 21.92% very often). Teachers seem to try to build a positive climate in the classroom by attempting to convince children that the EFL course in the state schools is not based on prior knowledge, thus children can start from the beginning and if they attend carefully they will be successful. Moreover, teachers seem to take advantage of prior knowledge in providing scaffolding to low proficiency level students. Therefore, they ask learners to work in pairs and provide explanations (40.35% very often), or assign differentiated work (26.31% very often). Observation data show that when the teacher asked the students to work in pairs in order to identify some hidden persons in pictures, more advanced students helped their peers to form the question correctly. Assigning differentiated work provided opportunities to all students to get involved in the lesson, e.g., pupils with limited linguistic knowledge were assigned to draw new vocabulary whereas more advanced learners had to write a short passage or dialogue using the new vocabulary.

Teachers were called to describe the attitudes of linguistically advanced students towards their classmates and the lesson. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Attitudes of students with advanced linguistic knowledge

	<i>Self-confident</i>	<i>Laughing at others</i>	<i>Feeling bored</i>	<i>Looking down at the lesson</i>
Never	1.75%	11.40%	7.89%	16.66%
Seldom	0%	42.10%	36.84%	42.98%
Often	8.77%	30.70%	31.57%	22.80%
Very often	46.49%	15.78%	19.29%	13.15%
Always	42.98%	0%	4.38%	4.38%

As indicated, students with PKE seem to exhibit great self-confidence. A great number of teachers (46.49%) reported that the particular behaviour is shown very often or always (42%). This finding is in line with the observation findings. For example, when students were asked to identify the characters in the big wall picture after listening to a dialogue, low ability students did not show any interest: one child was talking about other things while another was drawing. In another case, when children had to respond to a listening activity by drawing things according to what they heard, students without PKE could not follow the instructions, feeling that they had inadequate knowledge. This indicates that prior knowledge can shape a student's self esteem and this may be one more reason why many parents choose to send their children to private EFL classes prior to attending the level 1-EFL course at state primary schools. Although advanced students seldom laugh at others (42.10%) or look down at the lesson (42.98%), they often feel bored (31.57%) indicating the absence of motivation in the teaching process and language content.

Teachers were invited to report how students with PKE could disturb the lesson. The results of this question are shown below in Table 7.

Table 7. Teachers' opinion about how students with PKE could disturb the lesson

	<i>They answer without being asked</i>	<i>They don't let other to think</i>	<i>They deal with exercises of following lessons</i>	<i>They insist on wrong answers</i>	<i>They do not pay attention</i>
Never	3.50%	3.50%	6.14%	13.15%	3.50%
Seldom	16.66%	14.03%	44.73%	50%	40.35%
Often	2.63%	0.03%	4.38%	12.28%	8.77%
Very often	68.42%	75.43%	40.35%	22.80%	41.22%
Always	8.77%	7.01%	3.50%	2.63%	6.14%

Teachers believe that the most important problem is that the advanced students may not allow others time to think and answer. A very large percentage of the teachers (75.43% agree while 7.01% totally agree) share this opinion. This is confirmed by the observation data where children had to answer some comprehension questions. High ability students provided answers without being asked.

Another area of concern is students' indifference either by not paying attention (41.22% of teachers stated that this happens very often and 6.14% of them said that it

always happens) or by dealing with exercises of following lessons (40.35% of the teachers said that this is very common and 4.38% of them stated that this is always the case). The reactions of students with PKE are most possibly caused by direct teaching styles addressing students with PKE excluding the rest of the class from participating. Alternatively, the teachers may address medium or low level students thereby causing boredom to high achievers.

6. Implications – Discussion

Results paint a gloomy picture of EFL classes in state schools in Cyprus. Several aspects of the results warrant emphasis. To begin with, findings from the questionnaire as well as observation data show that true beginners are not so easily involved in the lesson. They feel disadvantaged exhibiting reluctance to express themselves in most cases, avoiding class participation. Lack of prior knowledge obviously hurts their self-confidence. They usually comment that they do not take private lessons complaining often that they have problems in the four language skills. Similarly, false beginners with prior knowledge of English may often or very often have a negative influence on the lesson as they may not find interest in the lesson. Teaching approaches need to address this group of learners too. Prior knowledge seems to affect students' self-esteem. Advanced students are usually self-confident and most of the teachers believe that these students do not give others the time to think. When students without PKE are given opportunities to answer, their self-esteem could be raised but this may rarely happen when the teacher has to teach 25 structures in the limited time of two forty-minute periods a week. So, an increase in the teaching time of EFL classes could have a positive effect on both students with and without PKE.

The findings of this survey can be useful for future planning. EFL courses may need to be introduced earlier in state schools in Cyprus in order to allow all young learners to be exposed to English at the same age. EFL teaching methodology needs to address mixed ability EFL settings. Education authorities i.e., the Pedagogical Institute, need to increase the number of seminars related to EFL teaching in mixed ability classes in order to inform all EFL teachers about how they can approach the multilevel EFL class.

7. Limitations – Directions in future research

The small sample used in this study imposes limitations upon the interpretations. Space triangulation may prove vital in validating the findings of the current study.

Undoubtedly, the issue of L2 learning in mixed ability classes is a fertile ground for further research. For example, more rigorous research is required on coping with mixed ability classes. The suitability of certain strategies needs to be examined. Hence, more qualitative data such as case studies in this context are desirable. Assessing pupils in mixed ability classes is another related issue that has not yet been considered. Clearly, a reliable instrument needs to be developed in order to measure performance in mixed ability settings.

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APPENDIX

Teachers' questionnaire

Gender:.....

Education:.....

Years of EFL teaching experience:.....

Rural/urban school:.....

Could you please circle the number which corresponds to your observations?

1=never, 2=seldom, 3=often, 4=very often, 5=always

1. At what level of competence do students start to affect negatively the flow of the lesson?					
a) True beginners e.g., having difficulties to understand instructions in the target language	1	2	3	4	5
b) False beginners when they do not find interest in what the teacher says	1	2	3	4	5
c) Other.....	1	2	3	4	5
2. Do students without prior knowledge of English feel disadvantaged? (circle only one answer)					
a) Yes					
b) No					
c) It depends on the teaching approach					
d) It depends on the student					
e) Other.....					
3. If students without prior knowledge of English feel disadvantaged, how do they express this?					
a) They do not pay attention	1	2	3	4	5
b) They do other things	1	2	3	4	5
c) They are afraid to speak	1	2	3	4	5
d) Other.....	1	2	3	4	5
4. What comments do children without prior knowledge of English make?					
a) 'I do not take private lessons'	1	2	3	4	5

b) 'I don't understand English'	1	2	3	4	5
c) 'I can't speak English'	1	2	3	4	5
d) 'I can't read'	1	2	3	4	5
e) 'I don't know how to write this'	1	2	3	4	5
f) Other.....	1	2	3	4	5
5. How do you respond to such comments?					
a) Assure the learners that they are going to be taught what is required from them.	1	2	3	4	5
b) Inform learners that the material being taught is part of what is demanded from them	1	2	3	4	5
c) Ask children to work in pairs or groups to offer and get help	1	2	3	4	5
d) Provide differentiated work	1	2	3	4	5
e) Other.....	1	2	3	4	5
6. How do the children with prior knowledge of English (PKE) feel?					
a) Self-confident	1	2	3	4	5
b) Laughing at and looking down on students who make mistakes	1	2	3	4	5
c) They feel bored	1	2	3	4	5
d) They look down on the lesson	1	2	3	4	5
7. Can you think of some ways that pupils with PKE could disturb the lesson?					
a) They answer without being asked	1	2	3	4	5
b) They don't let others think	1	2	3	4	5
c) They deal with exercises of the following lessons	1	2	3	4	5
d) They insist on wrong answers	1	2	3	4	5
e) They do not pay attention	1	2	3	4	5
f) Other.....	1	2	3	4	5