

Learner differences and implications for teachers – A case study at FELTE, ULIS

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Abstract

This study was conducted at the Faculty of English Language Education, University of Languages and International Studies, Viet Nam National University, Ha Noi. Despite the fact that students are from the same course, they are totally different individuals. Their differences are numerous, ranging from sex, age and age maturity, knowledge, intelligences, cognitive ability, personalities, cultural identities, religions and so on. These differences challenge teachers to find an appropriate approach to the different learners. Should the teachers use the same teaching methodology and techniques to teach all students? What possibly can they do in reality to teach different learners effectively? This report aims at sharing the author's findings based on the investigation into her two groups of language learners who possess different learning styles and preferences. Learners' differences and preferences for different learning styles really make teachers adapt their teaching methodology accordingly. Pedagogical implications for teaching are also drawn for the author in her teaching career and also for her colleagues for reference.

Key words:

- Learning style: the learner's preferred way of learning, influenced by their personality or by their previous learning experience
- Multiple Intelligences: a theory that argues that human intelligence has many dimensions, such as verbal, musical, and interpersonal, as well as logical/mathematical

Full paper

I. Introduction

To many people, teaching job is a boring and repetitive, with little or no creativity and so on. However, we strongly believe that this is only the personal opinion of those who often possess their own prejudice against the teaching career. In actuality, teachers are doing really hard work. This challenging job requires the teachers to have a lot of good qualities, such as having broad and deep knowledge of various topics, teaching ability as well as love and enthusiasm for the job. And, last but not least, teachers need to be flexible and adaptable to changes.

In reality, in different socio-economic contexts, there are different types of learners. The differences may vary from years to years. Even in the same year, learners from different social and economic backgrounds also vary greatly, such as gender, age, background knowledge, cognitive ability, personalities, cultural values, learning styles, learning needs and so on. These differences have huge impacts on the learners' learning mood and attitude. Also, to the teacher, the learners' differences have a role to play in the way the teacher approaches his or her students, in the teaching methodology ... in an effective way.

For deeper investigation into the issue, the three research questions are put forward:

1. In what ways are FELTE students different from each other?
2. Is it necessary for teachers to change their teaching styles to satisfy learners' various needs?
3. In reality, what can teachers do when teaching different learners?

II. Literature review

Learners play a vital role in the teaching process as without them, the teaching can't be carried out. In all teaching English methodology books, there is always a chapter about the learner and learner differences. The authors of these books may mention different aspects related to the learner, among them the key differences are as follows:

- In terms of gender and age: This depends much on the choice of the major subjects that the learners want to study. It is easy to notice that in certain classes, either the male or female students are in the majority. For instance, male students are more prevailing in technical or engineering courses. In terms of age, in general, students of different ages are often characterized by distinct psychological features. But even students of the same age and studying at the same course also differ from each other in the maturity (Ur, 2012). This is a typical phenomenon for teenage students whose puberty period varies. For girls, this period often starts one and a half year earlier than for boys.
- In terms of background knowledge: In practice, learners are placed into classes, based on certain selection and placement criteria. However, these criteria don't guarantee that all the learners in a classroom have the same level of the English knowledge, the knowledge of other languages, and the general background knowledge.
- In terms of capability: According Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences (cited in Ur, 2012), every learner possesses his or her prominent intelligences, such as logical-mathematical intelligence, linguistic intelligence, spatial intelligence, visual intelligence, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, and natural intelligence. Knowing the learners' different intelligences will surely help the teacher a lot to teach them successfully.
- In terms of personalities: Different learners have different personalities. Some are timid and shy, some are self-confident and sociable, but others are reserved... These various personalities not only have impacts on how the learners learn but also on the relationship between these learners and their teachers as well as other classmates.

Another feature that makes the learners different from each other is their learning styles. Ur (2012), Thornbury & Watkins (2007), Spratt et.al.(2005) and Harmer (2007) all agree that different learners prefer to have different learning styles. Some want to study individually, but others prefer groupwork learning activities. Some are visual learners, some are auditory learners, and others are bodily-kinesthetic learners. Once the teacher knows his or her students' preferred learning styles, he or she will design appropriate activities to satisfy all students' needs and preferences. And all these will help the teacher to teach his or her students efficiently.

Also, learning attitude and motivation are other influential factors. Some students go to school highly motivated, while others attend classes with great reluctance. The causes for this phenomenon may come from different factors. However, it is of great importance to

create the right motivation for the learners so that it can contribute to the success of the teacher's work.

Besides, Ur (2012) also mentions the learners' different interests and tastes. They may like different TV programmes, films, books, and newspapers. Their entertainment activities may vary, and they are interested in different learning environments, extracurricular activities as well as different subjects to study.

- In terms of cultural backgrounds and learning experiences: In reality, teachers at famous international standardized institutions are very likely to have chances to teach learners from different countries. Even within a country territory, teachers can also work with learners of different ethnic groups. In these cases, the learners' mother tongues are totally different. Besides, their learning experiences also vary greatly.

The above mentioned ones are the main differences among learners. It is advisable that in their teaching career, teachers should be aware of these differences so that they will organise appropriate activities accordingly to satisfy the learners' various needs and preferences.

Ur (2012) points out a number of challenges facing teachers when dealing with learner differences, which consequently cause some problems for teachers as follows.

- A learning task that the teacher uses can be too challenging for some students, while simultaneously this task is too easy for other students in the same class.
- The core available materials may work well with a number of students in the class. The other students either need more or less challenging ones.
- It is really difficult for the teacher to make all students participate actively in all class activities. Only several groups respond actively to the activities proposed by the teacher.
- Learners may feel bored and demotivated. Also, teachers find it difficult to motivate all the learners and make them all interested in the lesson.

However, Ur (2012) also points out numerous advantages for the teacher when teaching heterogeneous classes.

- In a classroom, the learners' different social background knowledge, life experience, various opinions and viewpoints, hobbies and ideas ...will make valuable resources for classroom communicative activities.
- The learners will gain more educational values when learning in the same classroom with students from different cultures. As a result, they have chance to get to know more about different cultures and experiences so that they will understand and respect people from different cultures.
- Students in heterogeneous classrooms can help each other to learn through groupwork activities, creating a co-operative and friendly learning environment.
- Working in these classrooms gives the teacher chances to develop professionally and become more creative when designing learning activities for students.

The aforementioned part is a sketch about learner differences and challenges as well as advantages when teaching these heterogeneous students. These basic summaries will be used for comparing, contrasting and analysing the learners' differences in the context of teaching and learning English at the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies.

II. Methodology

The research tools used in this study are the combination of observation and informal interviews. Having the chance to work with 50 second-year English major students for the 15 consecutive weeks, the authors noticed and recorded their students' differences. In-depth informal interviews were carried out later on with four students (two students chosen from each group). Besides, informal chit-chats and exchanges with other colleagues also revealed valuable information.

III. Data analysis and findings

1. The differences among the learners at FELTE

Normally, students of the same course at FELTE are of the same age. Among the fifty participants in this research, only five of them are one or two years older than other students. Thus, in general, the students don't vary much in their age. However, their age maturity may differ as female students often tend to be more mature than the male ones even though they were born in the same year. But we have noticed the following significant differences among our students even when they were of the same course.

In terms of the English language background, around ten students were really good at English. In fact, these students had really admirable starting points. They were good students of English-majored classes at famous gifted high schools. Thus these students generally had good level of the English language and English skills in comparison with the majority of other students who mainly came from the rural or mountainous areas. The biggest difference is the English listening and speaking abilities. Those coming from the rural and mountainous areas were not taught these two skills properly, so their performance was much lower than the students who were ranked top ten. Moreover, even when all these students studied in the same class at university, the students from the rural or mountainous areas mainly stayed in dormitories or shabby rented houses with much poorer equipped facilities that can help them to improve these two skills.

In terms of learning attitude and motivation, these students were generally serious about their learning and had a clear purpose for it. Interestingly, many of these students' parents used to study at this university, and then they themselves advised their children to follow in their footsteps. Besides, the policies of the courses available at this university are quite clear and straightforward. All of them require students to actively attend and participate in class activities. As a result, the students' serious learning attitude and motivation is frequently maintained. However, the challenges have also arisen when over half of these students possess smart phones and often use them in class. These students often claimed to search for information or new words they need in order to complete the teacher's in-class assignments. But the truth was that they didn't always use their smart phone for learning purposes. Some even spent class hours connecting with their friends on social networks or playing games. Luckily, these students were only in the minority and their wrong behaviours could be spotted and controlled under strict teacher's classroom management.

Another feature that varies among the students at FELTE was the life experience. In fact, these students could come from different provinces throughout Viet Nam, but mainly from the northern provinces. Some of them were luckier to come from the big cities with more advanced

conditions; however, many of FELTE students were from the rural and disadvantaged areas. Besides, their family backgrounds were also different. Many of their parents took great care of their children's development both emotionally and physically. Hence, these students tended to behave more confidently in any contexts. But other students, especially those coming from the poor families or disadvantageous areas, appeared to be less active and confident due to their lack of the necessary living skills. It is also important to note that we, the authors, don't intend to overgeneralize all the FELTE students. It was easy to notice a number of students whose parents were too protective to care for everything about their children. On the contrary, a few of students became fairly independent without their parents' assistance.

Last but not least, these students also differ greatly in their personalities and learning styles. These seem to be the most recognizable features. Among these fifty students, we noticed both the sociable and extrovert students and the shy and introvert students. The sociable and extrovert ones tended to be very active and participated in all class activities. They often took control of the debates or group work activities and volunteered to report or present the group's opinion in front of the class. On the contrary, the shy and introvert students often stepped back in the class activities and rarely put forward their viewpoints. Besides, despite the fact that all these fifty students are language learners, the students' preferred learning styles also vary. Frequent informal exchanges with these students revealed that they preferred different learning styles. For examples, there were students who said that they learnt very effectively when listening to music. But other students claimed that they couldn't concentrate on their studying with the background music. There were students who benefited much from group work assignments or projects, but there were also students who really developed their abilities when working individually. In short, different learners possessed different personalities and preferred to learn and to be taught in different ways.

In summary, the abovementioned differences were the most prominent ones among the students at FELTE. They included the language background, learning attitude and motivation, family background and life experience, personalities and learning styles. We, the authors, believe that teachers should always take these students' differences into consideration. This will certainly help the teachers to be ready and take control of their teaching job and develop themselves professionally.

2. Should teachers change their teaching styles to satisfy learners' various needs?

This is apparently quite a challenging issue, particularly in Viet Nam's context. The practice of respecting and following all the teachers' instructions has been existing for centuries. This was particularly true during the difficult time in the past when it was really difficult for the learners to get access to other sources of documents, such as well-equipped libraries, cable TVs or Internet. At that time, the teachers were considered the only official source of knowledge and information.

But things have been changing. Thanks to the modern technology and global integration, both the teachers and the learners have become more open-minded. They no longer insist that the teachers are the only providers of knowledge and information. In fact, for many learners, the teachers are the facilitators, guides, or advisors that help them in the process of their learning.

What may happen if the teachers resist the changes? Our informal interviews with the colleagues have revealed that the teaching job these days is under much pressure from not only the

institutions but also from the students and their parents who are always ready to comment on the teachers' behaviours on all kinds of social websites. Besides, in many of education institutions these days, including FELTE-ULIS, the students have the rights to evaluate the teachers' performance in the classroom. And this evaluation also partially contributes to the performance results of the teachers at the end of each academic year. Thus, gaining the students' high level of satisfaction is also important in the teachers' job.

For all the above mentioned reasons and factors, we strongly believe that when teaching different learners with different needs and learning styles, the teachers also need to adapt their teaching methods accordingly so that they can gain more experience in dealing with different learners. Besides, not only the students become satisfied when they have adaptive teachers, but the teachers' professional development can also be improved.

3. In reality, what can teachers do when teaching different learners?

The research has given us useful lessons for the authors as well as their colleagues in their teaching career. Here are some of the practical suggestions:

Firstly, the teachers should vary the classroom activities. Admittedly, it is very difficult for a teacher to satisfy all students in a commonly very crowded classroom. Hence, the teachers may take these ideas into consideration. Sometimes, they can use more challenging documents for more advanced students. Sometimes, they can use less challenging documents which are appropriate and beneficial to the less advanced learners. Also, various teaching and learning activities should also be maintained, with both teacher-student and student-student interaction. Besides, all the language skills should be paid equal attention to, without preference for any particular skill.

Secondly, it is also important for the teachers to get to know about their students' preferences and hobbies. This can be done through activities that help students to show off all their knowledge, experience, and personalities. A questionnaire on students' different learning styles may partially help. However, students often show off themselves best through classroom activities or through interaction. That is why the teachers should also encourage student-student interaction through group work activities, especially brainstorming activities when the learners are free to propose their opinions.

Last, but not least, the teachers should try to discover their students' maximum ability through using open-ended questions, which are suitable for students of any level of language proficiency. For low level students, the teachers may expect them to give basic information to answer the question. However, higher level students are expected to give more detailed answers with additional comments or evaluation to show their high level of knowledge and thought. Or when designing classroom activities, the teachers may have the core requirements that any students can achieve successfully. The additional requirements may be applied to the more advanced learners.

The above mentioned activities and methods have been used in our classrooms and have been proved to be effective when teaching diversified classes. We do not insist on teachers using all these suggested activities rigidly. It depends much on our students and contexts. But, again, we strongly believe that all teachers need to take their students diversity into consideration in order

to adapt their teaching methods accordingly. By that way, not only can the students benefit but the teachers themselves can also develop professionally.

IV. Conclusion

The learners, despite their same age and learning environment, still vary greatly. This is true in all learning contexts, and students at FELTE, ULIS is of no exception. They have different social and economic backgrounds, they are of different level of English language proficiency, they possess different learning styles and prefer to be taught in different ways and so on. These diversities really challenge the teachers how to teach effectively. However, the students' differences themselves also create opportunities for the teachers. Combining these opportunities and designing appropriate and diversified classroom activities will certainly ensure effective teaching and learning activities.

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