



# REVERTING OR PROGRESSING: THE DILEMMA OF HIGHER EDUCATION ENGLISH INSTRUCTION IN A HETEREGENOUS CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

It is common for university classes to be heterogeneous due to the vast range of students' backgrounds. Undoubtedly, teachers employ their own strategies to address this matter. Hence, this study aims to investigate how teachers design the teaching approach and learning resources in the presence of a heterogeneous classroom. This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate the approach employed by English lecturers in universities when managing diverse classrooms. A total of six participants were interviewed in order to obtain the desired data. These data were subsequently evaluated thematically to investigate the narrative of university lecturers in higher education regarding this issue. The results of this study revealed that every participant had actively sought to acquire knowledge regarding the extent of student diversity present in the classroom. Participants also devised effective strategies for constructing the learning material and teaching methods that will optimize the development of all students' capacity. While there might be varying opinions among participants, they unanimously acknowledged that effectively teaching a diverse classroom requires careful thought and consideration in order to meet the individual needs of all students, regardless of students varying level of knowledge. This study hopefully can elucidate some teaching strategies while dealing with heterogeneous classroom.

**Keywords:** Heterogenous classroom; teaching strategy

## INTRODUCTION

With the growing numbers of university in Indonesian, the educational institution faces significant responsibilities. Based on data provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2023), there are a total of 4523 universities in Indonesia. Furthermore, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education amounted to 9,320,410. With this high number, Indonesian higher education needs to maintain their essential obligations and must continue to fulfill its purpose as outlined in Republic of Indonesia Law No. 12 of 2012. This function entails fostering national intelligence through the cultivation of human potential and the promotion of knowledge advancement. Additionally, universities have been established with the aim of educating and developing highly skilled and capable human resources in Indonesia. This obligation becomes progressively more significant since for certain individuals, higher education

may serve as the ultimate stage of education that bridges students from the educational phase to the professional phase. Without a doubt, while carrying out their responsibilities, certain obstacles inevitably arise that must be promptly addressed.

Classroom heterogeneity has consistently been an interesting discourse to explore among other various challenges. Nusser and Gehr (2020) identified that the presence of heterogeneity, encompassing variations in students' academic performance, family history, language proficiency, and special educational requirements, has emerged as a significant concern in the field of education. These issues have also escalated at the university level. According to Coaldrake (2001), students in higher education typically come from various schools that have taught them in different ways. Additionally, there are disparities based on age, social status, gender, race, ethnicity, and academic readiness. These differences add another layer of complexities into the education system in university.

In terms of competency, various studies have identified distinct elements that might forecast the variations in students' academic performance. Stewart (2007) observed that internal factors, such as student effort and parent-child communication, play a key role in influencing the academic success of students. Moreover, the academic accomplishment of pupils is significantly impacted by their traits, personality, and learning styles (Engin-Demir, 2009; Komaraju, et.al., 2011). Academic accomplishment is also influenced by factors such as academic engagement, motivation, and academic emotions (Rezaei, et.al., 2023; Tella, 2007). Still, the importance of school environment as a contributing component should not be overlooked. According to Stewart (2007), children who have a strong sense of school cohesion, especially when it comes to favorable relationships with their peers, tend to perform better academically. In order to determine students' degree of accomplishment, it is also important to consider the type of academic activity and assistance provided, as well as the well-being of the students (Engin-Demir, 2009). With these in mind, teachers encountered tremendous challenges in dealing with kids of varying competencies due to a myriad of contributing circumstances.

Due to this backdrop, educational institutions have enacted measures designed to address this problem. One of the ongoing discourses that has persisted for several years revolves around the concept of classifying students into either homogenous or heterogeneous classes (Shields, 1995; Briggs, 2020). Some research favors homogeneous groups like Lou, et.al. (1996) who discovered homogeneous class grouping appears to be a useful means to facilitate student learning, particularly in large classes and especially in math and science courses. Shields (1995) supports this technique, stating that having multiple types of classes with similar levels of achievement allows students to have equal opportunities to learn according to their individual requirements, which can ultimately enhance their academic performance. Fritsche (2021) suggests that teachers tend to prefer homogeneous groups because they are easier to manage, more time-efficient, and promote common engagement among students, which facilitates student advancement. However, opposing opinions also existed who believe that heterogenous class is the better classroom. Gabaldon-Estevan (2020) argues that homogeneous classrooms tend to prioritize academic achievement in a restricted manner, whereas research supporting heterogeneous classrooms tends to examine broader concepts such as equity and inclusiveness. Zamani (2016) asserts that academically, students with lower levels of achievement might enhance their knowledge by participating in cooperative learning within a heterogeneous classroom. Given the differing perspectives, the school administration must carefully consider the most appropriate method to assist their students in reaching their full potential.

Unfortunately, there are circumstances where schools cannot segregate students into different classrooms according to their academic

achievements and capabilities, leading to the presence of heterogeneous classrooms. Teachers had a multitude of obstacles in this environment. Without a doubt, teachers must employ effective teaching practices to address the current issues. Initially, the teacher has to adjust to the varied requirements of the classroom, necessitating careful deliberation. Svensson (2017) advocates for the implementation of instructions that strike a balance which should be neither overly challenging nor excessively simple, in order to accommodate all students in all levels of academic achievement. However, Lotan (2006) finds it extremely difficult in implementing this due to the presence of an additional adverse consequence. Parents may have concerns about this diverse and watered down curriculum. Students express dissatisfaction with either experiencing boredom or, on the contrary, facing a significant number of academic failures. Ultimately, teachers face the potential frustration of being unable to meet the needs of students who are either high achievers or struggling learners. Despite these challenges, teachers need to be able to deal with this situation and therefore can help students to improve their capacity.

Studies about dealing with heterogenous classroom have become focus for some years. Different teachers had implemented different strategies to deal with it. Rytivaara (2011) believed that heterogeneous classroom in a primary school should be flexibly grouped based on their learning styles to yield a more effective academic result. Meanwhile, Allsopp (1997) implemented class wide peer tutoring program for his students in mathematic class with a great result. Tzivinikou (2015) agreed on individualized instruction and thus opted to use co-teaching strategy which involves two or more teachers in heterogeneous classroom teaching different group. All these studies imply the use of different strategies to deal with heterogeneous group. This research will further investigate on different strategies to teach English which are used by teacher in the university level. In addition, this research will further on how teachers design their material in the heterogeneous classroom which is often overlooked in some other research. Thus, this research is an attempt to find out not only how heterogenous class was taught, but how teachers design their material to deal with different type of students within heterogenous classroom.

## **METHODS**

This study will employ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in order to address the background information. This study design centers on the individual experiences, interpretations, and existential perceptions of individuals in the world. Therefore, in order to gather data, it is necessary to have "rich, detailed, first-person" accounts of idiographic experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In addition, IPA entails a reciprocal process of mutual meaning-making that occurs between the investigator and the individuals involved (Smith, 2018). The participants endeavor to get a deeper understanding of their own experiences by communicating them to the researcher, who in turn aims to comprehend the participants' efforts to make sense of their individual realities (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Thus, this type of study fits the need of this research.

Participants were recruited based on three requirements: (1) teach English in University level, (2) have experience in teaching heterogenous classroom, (3) have at least 5 years' experience in teaching. Through snowball technique, 5 participants were recruited. Before conducting the study, for ethical purposes, all of these participants were given statement of consent as participants of this research. In addition, all participants were put under pseudonyms. The demography of these participants can be seen as follows.

**Table 1. Demography of Participants**

Participants	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years of Experience
1	Nadia	Female	34	10 Years
2	Debby	Female	38	9 Years
3	Ruth	Female	37	6 years
4	Wyatt	Male	33	6 Years
5	Derrick	Male	35	5 years
6	Yuvan	Male	41	7 Years

All participants underwent a semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted in a casual setting, allowing the participants to casually discuss their personal experiences. The interview results were transcribed and examined. Subsequently, several reoccurring themes were extracted from the interview transcripts. Themes were identified and subsequently reassessed. Finally, after carefully analyzing each line, a framework was developed to visually represent the relationships between the various topics.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

After conducting the interview, there are three major themes were found. These three themes are correlated to each other. Some participants are agreeing on one theme and have conflicting opinion on the other theme. The result of the study can be seen as follows.

### **Awareness of What We Are Dealing With: Let's Scrutinize**

The conducted interviews have revealed that all participants have recognized the significant potential to confront heterogeneous classrooms at their own respective university. The following excerpts demonstrate the teacher's self-awareness regarding the circumstances they encountered.

“They all come from different regions, schools, economic and family backgrounds, so it's no surprise that they'll be quite different from one another.” (Excerpt 1, Wyatt)

“Yeah, I'm aware that the university will have a bunch of different types of students in the classroom. There's nothing I can do. Can't escape it.” (Excerpt 2, Ruth)

Awareness of the heterogeneous classroom that educators will inevitably confront is illuminated by the excerpts. This awareness grows because educators know that universities will accommodate students from various backgrounds. Therefore, variety will inevitably become a ubiquitous phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that having an understanding of class diversity is essential for conducting the teaching process in heterogeneous classes. Wolff, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen (2020) believe that teachers' extensive experience allows them to build episodic knowledge about specific classroom settings, which enhances their awareness of this matter. Furthermore, teachers who maintain a continuous awareness of the classroom situation are able to effectively manage their class by being prepared to address specific individuals and issues and knowing how to respond in various circumstances (Doyle, 2006).

All participants unanimously concurred that it is vital for them to explore and understand the many diversities. Each of them is making an attempt to identify the varying abilities of the students, resulting in cognitive diversity inside the classroom. This is further explained in the following excerpts.

“I'm just curious. So, like, at the start, I made sure to check out students' background knowledge. We connect with each other through games and casual chats in class. Once I've had about 3 or 4 meetings, I usually start doing some mapping. This student is capable, this student still requires attention, this student definitely needs a lot of attention.” (Excerpt 3, Ruth)

“I had a little conversation with them. I reach out to them using different approaches. Just hanging out, you know? Sometimes in class, sometimes outside of class. I came up with a class stratification. What really matters is that I have a good understanding of my students' abilities.” (Excerpt 4, Derrick)

These excerpts highlight the participants' efforts to gain a deeper understanding of their students' proficiency in the English language. Various endeavors were documented, such as dialogues, entertaining activities, or interactions with students beyond the confines of the classroom. This knowledge is crucial, particularly in the process of teaching and learning. According to Adams, Jones, and Tatum (2007), understanding students' knowledge allows teachers to establish achievable educational objectives, develop effective teaching methods, and predict areas where students may struggle. Therefore, assessing the pupils' level of proficiency will be a crucial step in carrying out the subsequent educational process in a diverse classroom.

### **Reverting, Progressing, or Find the Middle Ground**

Creating instructional materials for diverse classrooms has become a further issue encountered by university educators. Through excerpts, our participants express their own confusion on this particular matter.

“When I first started out as an educator, everything felt completely unfamiliar to me. Dealing with a variety of students is also one of them. I got to admit, sometimes I get so confused about how to handle this stuff. I got to adapt fast. So, I like having discussions with senior lecturers” (Excerpt 5, Derrick)

“Should I make it based on the demands of the university's subjects? Should I make things easy? So, how tough should I make it for the students? I always find myself wondering about those questions.” (Excerpt 6, Wyatt)

The above excerpts illustrate that the participants experienced a degree of uncertainty over the appropriate approach to address this specific kind of problem. One participant demonstrates that their lack of experience in handling heterogeneous classrooms at the start of their career has become the underlying cause of the problem. One participant in particular remains doubtful about the level of difficulty of their material that should be thought in the classroom. Nonetheless, it is the educator's obligation to produce instructional content, as it determines the trajectory of their students' learning journey.

Although there was initial uncertainty, the participants have formulated their own pedagogical approaches derived from their acquired teaching experiences. Nevertheless, there appears to be a divergence of perspectives over the type of material that they will teach. Several participants have shown a preference for progressing with the learning content that can be seen in the excerpts below.

“I just go with the flow and keep moving with the material. I am completely okay with the different levels of learners' capacity. So basically, they got to be able to talk in class and master some stuffs following what the syllabus wants. But, if they need extra lesson, I'll do it outside the classroom” (Excerpt 7, Yuvan)

“Yeah, I teach based on what the lesson needs. So, if the material is about past events, students should be able to talk about it. I'll teach based on what they need to learn at that level. If they're really smart, they'll give us some fancy sentences and use high level of vocabularies like a pro. Those who aren't as strong, I expect them to wrap up the conversation nicely and in a way that's easy to understand. ” (Excerpt 8, Nadia)

According to the provided excerpt, both participants share the belief that instruction should be progressed in line with the requirements of the subjects. Both participants equally believe that the goal should be ensuring that students achieve a high level of mastery which is equivalent with the level of university education. Both perspectives recognize the existence of diversity and are willing to accommodate students to achieve what the curriculum wants. However, they agree that that the focus of teaching learning process should be to make all students achieve objectives as mandated by the curriculum.

Nevertheless, a participant has raised a slight concern regarding the capacity of underachieving students to sustain their concentration in the lesson. Therefore, the participant regularly revisits previous material, as explained in the subsequent excerpt.

“I would not say that I don't want to return. It breaks my heart if the course content is consistently confusing students. Students who don't do well in school could feel pressured. Therefore, I do my best to meet their requirements so I also need to ensure that low achieving students may also follow the instruction well.” (Excerpt 9, Ruth)

The above excerpt depicts the viewpoint of a teacher who frequently revisits teaching material that students should have already mastered in their prior education. Participants believe that students who have low academic achievement are particularly vulnerable to suffering stress because they consistently struggle in comprehending the material. By periodically revisiting the instruction of basic English skills, the participant ensures that students do not become disoriented in every lesson.

The other participants believe that the material should be negotiated to comply with both low and high achieving students. Both excerpts below clearly illustrate how participants strategically create their educational content to achieve a moderate level of difficulty.

“Sometimes, the material discussed in each instructional session can be different. One day, I try to cater to students who may have some limitations, while at the next meeting I provides some challenges to those who are more advanced. I always try to teach what is in the curriculum. The students may have trouble understanding, it might be because they haven't grasped the material that came before. When that happens, I just make things simpler and go back to the lessons they didn't get.” (Excerpt 10, Derrick)

“Once I have a good understanding of the students' backgrounds, I will determine the appropriate level of difficulty that will suit everyone. I made sure that the material was engaging enough for students to follow along, without making it overly challenging or too easy that they would get bored. Well, if we're talking about a number between 1 and 10, I'd say the difficulty is probably around a 6 to 8 depending on the students I meet.” (Excerpt 11, Debby)

The excerpts illustrate several pedagogical strategies employed by teachers to cater to the requirements of heterogeneous classes, catering to the needs of both underperforming and high-performing students. A participant

chooses to transfer their instructional materials across sessions to cater to both low-achieving and high-achieving students. Meanwhile, another participant opts to offer a single resource that meets the requirements of both high-achieving and low-achieving children. Both participants recognized the relevance of every student and stressed the significance of considering their needs, although in different manners. Hence, the intricacy of the material would be customized to meet the overall needs of the class.

### **Group Work Based on Capacity: The Different Approaches**

The findings of our study uncovered several insights regarding the approaches employed in managing diverse classes. Interestingly, nearly all participants incorporate grouping into their method. Therefore, more investigation of the participants' implementation of their grouping system is necessary in this sub-chapter.

First, all participants attempted to categorize groups according to their competencies. However, there were two contrasting viewpoints regarding the best way to assign students to different categories. The majority of participants exhibit a preference for incorporating students with diverse skills in a group, as demonstrated in the provided excerpts.

“I usually try to combine 2 people with different abilities. The smart and the less capable. It is like peer tutoring who are helping each other out.” (Excerpt 12, Debby)

“Mixed groups actually complement each other. People who don't get it can pick up a thing or two from their colleagues. People who already understand the material also learn from the challenges they might encounter and, at the same time, explore deeper into the subject matter. That's a total win-win situation!” (Excerpt 13, Derrick)

“I don't want anyone to think there's any discrimination going on. Some kids are considered smart and get special attention, while others who are less intelligent are left out. It would be great if they could learn together. It feels like they put these togetherness skills to good use in the real world once they start working.” (Excerpt 14, Ruth)

From the provided excerpts, it is evident that participants commonly want students to engage in heterogeneous grouping, which involves combining underachieving students with high performing students. Several reasons have been identified, including the potential for peer tutoring to occur between students, which is advantageous for both parties. Additionally, there is the potential for collaborative learning through student-led discussions (Wilkinson, Soter, & Murphy, 2010), as well as the prevention of discrimination and discomfort within the classroom.

Conversely, several educators argue that children should be organized homogeneously according to their ability. Consequently, students who excel academically will be placed in groups with peers of similar abilities, as will students who struggle academically. The following passages provide an overview of the homogenous grouping systems implemented in the classroom.

“I pair up the intelligent individuals with other intelligent individuals. People who are still learning are grouped together with others who are also still learning and just average. So these groups talk to each other and they really showcase their abilities there. People have the freedom to explore based on their own abilities. So, they both work on improving themselves.” (Excerpt 15, Nadia)

“I usually come up with differentiated instruction for two or more groups to accommodate multiple groups with varying skill levels. By that way, they can learn at their own speed.” (Excerpt 15, Yuvan)

Based on the extracts, it is clear that the participants have a preference for clustering students who have similar academic achievements in heterogeneous classroom. These participants are certain that engaging in this grouping strategy enables students to experience significant academic growth, as they have the opportunity to learn at their own individual speed. Teachers have the flexibility to create a differentiated instruction approach, in which students get varied learning materials based on their individual abilities (Tomlinson, 2014). Underperforming students do not feel compelled to keep up with the rapid progress of high-achieving students when they are actually not at the same level. Meanwhile, high-achieving students are not obligated to restrict or diminish themselves to align with the abilities of low-achieving students. They progress in tandem with their own rates of development. Hence, the participants believe students will develop more if they are grouped homogeneously in heterogeneous classroom.

Although there are some differing opinions on this matter, one participant sums up his experience of both grouping strategies which can be seen as follows.

“It really comes down to what I want to achieve during the lesson. When it comes to strengthening students understanding of the material, it's more effective to have a mix of students who may be performing at different levels. We provide them with enjoyable games to maintain their motivation and they can help each other out. However, for personal growth, it's more beneficial to have a group of like-minded individuals who can engage in meaningful discussions. Intelligent students engage in conversations with their peers. Those who may be struggling to comprehend the material should also talk to his similar peers. It's also more convenient for teachers to keep track of.” (Excerpt 16, Wyatt)

From that excerpt, it became evident that this specific participant held the belief that each grouping method may possess its own advantages. The participant mentioned above has the belief that certain strategies are effective when they are applied in accordance with the learning objective. Hence, it is vital to thoroughly deliberate when devising the instructional methodologies for the heterogeneous classroom. Ultimately, the paramount objective is for all participants in this research to effectively address the diverse classroom environment in order to optimize children's academic growth.

## CONCLUSIONS

Managing a heterogeneous classroom with students of different backgrounds and abilities can be somewhat demanding for certain educators in higher education. The students in the classroom would have varying amounts of prior knowledge, learning styles, cultural background, and motivation. Managing classroom dynamics and cultivating a healthy learning environment can be a tough task due to the varying composition of students. Lecturers must adeptly handle divergent students and guarantee that all students are treated well in the classroom. To overcome these difficulties, it is necessary to engage in meticulous preparation, adaptability, understanding, and the utilization of comprehensive instructional approaches. Lecturers must acknowledge and adopt the diversity present in their classes and design educational activities that cater to the requirements of every student.

This study aims to investigate the methods used by university lecturers to conduct English lessons in a diverse classroom setting. A higher education institution often offers advanced education that necessitates students to acquire and excel in abilities that are frequently associated with



higher-order thinking. Teachers were faced with a dilemma on whether they should continue moving forward or go back to previous material when teaching a diverse classroom. The study reveals that to effectively manage this type of classroom, our participants completely acknowledged that they must possess a keen awareness of the extent of diversity present inside the classroom. Nevertheless, the participants hold divergent views about the optimal approach to address this particular sort of class. Certain educators have the belief that it is necessary for them to advance and make progress with the curriculum. While some other individuals hold the belief that reverting back is necessary, as they perceive it to be more convenient if every student has similar prior knowledge before advancing. Furthermore, the issue of grouping has gained significant attention. Some participants assert that homogeneous grouping is preferable in a heterogeneous classroom since it enables consistent individual progress. Meanwhile, participants who organize their students heterogeneously believe that having a varied range of ability levels within a group helps promote cooperative learning and allow students to complement one other. However, there is also another aspect that is widely acknowledged by the participants is the importance of selecting materials and strategies that meet the individual requirements of all children while teaching in a diverse classroom.

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