

## Navigating Learner Differences in Secondary Level English Classrooms

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### Abstract

#### Article History:

Submitted 10 Jan 2024

Reviewed 20 May 2024

Accepted 30 July 2024

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#### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.3126/eltp.v9i1-2.68721>

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#### Publisher

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*The purpose of this article is to explore the teachers' perceptions on different aspects of learner differences and managing such differences in the secondary level English Language Education (ELE) classrooms. The explored perceptions have been thematically presented on seven major aspects of classroom learner differences such as: age, intelligence, learning styles, learning strategies, motivation, personality, and norms, values and beliefs that cause differences as an issue have been realized along with concept of inclusive education as an approach to deal with learners in the classroom. Such differences as an issue can be softened by raising awareness among the students, so that they will realize their own as well as other fellow's characteristics. As this article is based on phenomenological research approach, four different secondary level English language teachers, with at least more than five years' teaching experiences, were interviewed and the data have been analyzed thematically, and interpreted. The result shows that learner differences exist in the school classrooms*

*of highly dense urban areas. These differences in the classroom can create complexities for teachers in teaching language courses in foreign context. However, by understanding the concept of inclusive education, teachers can include varieties of students without any bias in a single classroom and teach in a better way.*

**Keywords:** awareness, differences, factors, inclusive education, learners

### Introduction

Learner difference is one of the serious issues that the teachers face in the classrooms. Schools in the periphery of heterogeneous communities often consist of learner differences in English classroom which seem challenging to the English language teaching (ELT). Learner differences can be realized through their diverse features during learning in the school environment. The differences of student backgrounds in English language classroom is challenging for the teachers. For that, teachers' duty is to balance the individual needs of the students in the classroom, while teaching the required materials

as heterogeneous ESL classroom is an ideal location to observe learner differences (Petruskevich, 1997). Identifying learner differences is a hard job, however, dealing with diverse learners is much harder (Possi & Millinga, 2017). Learner difference factors such as: age, gender, motivation, attitude, intelligence, aptitude, learning styles, personality, educational background, learning strategies and anxiety (Brown, 2014; Harmer, 2007; Kashinah, 2014) may create imbalances among learners in the classroom.

Managing learner differences in the classroom is an issue worth addressing in education practices across countries where inclusive societies are existed, developed, promoted and sustained. As present day society is heterogeneous, the learners in classrooms are also in diverse forms. For this, inclusive education is a process that involves the transformation of schools and learning centers to teach all children: boys and girls, students from various ethnic groups and linguistic minorities, rural and urban populations with diverse backgrounds and abilities and those who have exceptional learning needs (Possi & Milinga, 2017).

Learners have different characteristic features. They vary enormously in learning a language (Ellis (2004) in the classroom. All the learners in the classroom do not equally learn in the same rate. Similarly, if students do not participate equally in the classroom, the students who participate more can have the chances of advantage. Further, in a heterogeneous English language classroom, each student has their individual needs, interests, abilities and expectations, which must be balanced (Petruskevich, 1997). Some students find it difficult to learn in a heterogeneous classroom but some others find it easy. Similarly, some of them are better equipped to learn certain skills than that of others, and similarly, all the students can't learn all the language skills equally well. This is due to the fact that students' learning differs as their learning traits differ, and their thinking processes differ depending on what they are trying to learn (Jonassen & Grabowski, 2011).

Learner differences in the classroom can create imbalanced situation in learning in the English language classroom and in the management of total school environment which is the ultimate concern of this study. In recent years, in teacher education programmes pre-service teacher education has also been included as an important part of teacher education especially in the countries with heterogeneous societies. In this situation, the different forms of education such as: inclusive education, adaptive education and diversity education appeared to support the issue of learner differences in the classroom.

Learners' differences can be universally realized in terms of different aspects such as: age, gender, intelligence, learning styles, learning strategies, mother tongue, ethnicity, family background, aptitude, motivation, anxiety, beliefs, willingness to communicate, social class, religion and ability. A series of differences can be realized among learners in the classroom, however, it depends on the researcher to select and study on particular differences as the variables of the study.

Learner differences in a classroom can create imbalances among learners and that work as an obstacle to their teachers to deal with them. However, when such learner characteristics are treated as a resources and strategies, such barrier can be overcome when they are taken positively as resources. In this situation, English language teachers can use the range of experiences and perspectives of the culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse students as the powerful resources to tackle them in a more different ways in the new environments (Shore, 2008). The experienced teachers can realize the imbalances easily (Petruskevich, 1997). In addition, they can better adopt different learning strategies

to address this issue of learner differences in the classroom on how to encourage silent and introvert students to participate in the activities or respect their preferences and participate themselves actively in classroom teaching learning activities.

While teaching English as a foreign language in a school in Kaski district for two years, I noticed a few differences among learners in the classroom. Students of different age, sex and mother tongues were there functioning as a barrier to language learning on the part of learners (Petruskevich, 1997). Male and female students seem uninterested to participate in a single group in group work activities.

Similarly, students of particular local community who share common mother tongue seem interested to sit together in a single bench and often talk in their mother tongue for personal matters. I realized that these differences obviously create problem in teaching and learning in a language classroom. This opinion matches to what Petruskevich (1997, p.1) states that teachers face complexities in dealing with the students of varied linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds in the classroom. By realizing the learner differences in an EFL classroom that create problems in dealing with learners and addressing the EFL teachers from the perspectives of teachers became the main concern of my study.

Due to this fact, the need of inclusive education and diversity education has been hotly discussed among educationists. The aim of inclusive education is that every child has their right to receive education equally, regardless of disabilities, learning difficulties or ethnic minorities. Such educational approaches offer different insights to teachers on how students' diverse needs can be addressed. For that, there requires planning of curriculum, quality instruction and total evaluation at school level (Wu et al., 2012). In order to face challenges those appeared from students with cultural, racial, linguistic, socioeconomic and educational diversities; there requires pre-service and in-service trainings to the teachers. Further, there requires culturally responsive teachers who can cooperate, collaborate and reciprocate with students in teaching and learning activities. For this, different forms of teacher education programme such as: multicultural education, urban education, and teaching English language learners can be adopted (Yuan, 2018). In the same way, to combat this situation, inclusive education, diversity education, teachers' professional development programmes can be issued effectively. Hence, school level curriculums, policies and procedures that place diverse students at a disadvantage are to be improved.

A number of authors talked about learner differences, their consequences and on how to deal with the students of those differences. Language learners vary in a number of dimensions such as: personality, motivation, learning style, aptitude and age. The factors for second language acquisition (SLA) are the learner differences for L2 learning. Ellis (2004) presents seven individual difference factors in SLA that are frequently used as instruments in research are the differences in: learning styles, motivation, anxiety, personality, learner beliefs, aptitude and learning strategies.

Thomas (2018) talks about two types of diversities: structural diversity and interactional diversity to the similar concept of differences. Similarly, Jonassen and Grabowski (2011) see learner differences in four ways that individuals differ in their general skills, aptitudes and preferences for processing information, constructing meaning of that information, and application of that meaning into new situations, however, they also differ in their abilities to perform different learning tasks and

outcomes. This study tries to answer the following questions:

- How do Secondary level EFL teachers of Nepal perceive learner differences? What various aspects exist there in creating learner differences in ELE classroom?
- How do teachers tackle the issue of learner differences in the classroom?

### **Methodology**

Existence of learner differences in the classroom is a phenomenon. To derive the ideas in this phenomenon, interview is the sole method of data collection. Four secondary level English teachers with five years of experiences in teaching English in the public schools of Pokhara valley as the participants have been interviewed for fifteen minutes to each. For that, interview guide was prepared on the basis of the two research questions. Then, they were asked the related questions on which they responded. Interview records were transcribed into written forms and the ideas have been coded and further grouped into different themes for qualitative analysis and interpretations. With the help of interview questions, the reality in the context of learner differences in the classroom have been drawn.

This research is pragmatic in nature as it is not only concerned on the reality of learner differences but more concerned on what works to be done best for the management of the learner differences as an issue. Hence, it does not seek the single reality, but seeks multiple realities and multiple perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) from varied participants of different backgrounds. The ideas, values, norms, expressions and performances of the learners that the teachers found in the school environment are taken as the resources for instruction and management of learning in the classroom. Collected data were coded and interpreted thematically. Teachers' views were presented separately in terms of learner differences and their management in the classroom.

### **Results and Discussion**

The perceptions of teachers on the descriptions of potential learner difference factors and the approaches to responding the issue have been presented as two broad themes hereafter. The first one deals with the perceptions on what factors there are for learner differences and the second one on the possible approaches for dealing with such differences.

#### **Learner Difference Factors**

Learner differences in the classroom are better to be interpreted in terms of learner difference factors. The major learner difference factors found in the opinions of the participants have been mentioned on the basis of specific themes.

#### **Age**

Age resembles maturity of the learners as the participants opined, and agreed on taking age as the learner difference factors. T1 stated that theoretically, age is one of the factors for learner differences but nowadays students are of the similar ages i.e. 14 to 18 in the secondary level classroom. T2 claimed that the way the children acquired their mother tongue differs from the way the adolescents learn English is different. However, as T3 stated oral modes such as songs and the chants are better for the children whereas longer texts or literary works can be read and easily interpreted by the adolescents. Not only this, the matured ones can learn the complex grammar items as T4 stated. In this way, age is the learner difference factor as well as the factor influencing language learning that is assisted with critical period hypothesis (Ellis, 1985) that is a period in which language acquisition takes place naturally and effortlessly.

## **Intelligence**

All the teachers stated that intelligence is also a general factor of language learning that creates learner differences in the classroom. T1 stated that we have different intelligences. The way I learn may not be followed by others. In the classroom of T2 there was a real singer who can sing various songs, perhaps he would learn better if there are number of songs and rhymes in the textbook of grade ten. T3 states that students want to discuss and write in the school and want to read the longer texts at home. This indicates they have linguistic intelligence. T4 has little bit different experience that his students do not want to listen the texts and the presentation every time, they also continuously look at their teachers for visuals and for lips reading and body movements.

Participants' ideas are connected to the existence of Multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) on learners mind as a results they prefer varieties in the classroom (Ellis, 1985). Gardners' theory (1995) of multiple intelligences suggests the eight different types of intelligences that the human beings possess are: logical-mathematical, linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist (Sadker & Sadker, 2003). All the teachers agreed that we human beings possess all these forms of intelligences, but their ratio differs from person to person and one of them is primary to particular learner and hence they must be exposed on the basis of their primary intelligence.

## **Learning Styles**

On the basis of learning styles, learners are of different categories as all the participants agreed. On the basis of learning styles, there are five types of learners: visual learners, verbal or auditory learners, kinesthetic or tactile learners, global learners and sequential learners (Seller et al., 2007). T1 stated that most of the learners in his classroom are visual learners. They prefer to study graphs, look at models and pictures, and take notes for reviewing at a later time, use blackboard much for drawings, models, etc. T2 stated that his classroom consists of students of three types of learning styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Visual learners expect videos or visual aids; verbal or auditory learners are likely to absorb reading materials and lectures or listening materials more easily than other students. Kinesthetic learners prefer their teachers' actions, gestures or body movements while presentation. T3 added that tactile learners learn by doing physically or handling or operating the objects that are connected to real-life topics. T4 added that some students in the classroom read the texts in the books and write the summary or make notes, so that they will reduce the reading loads of the same materials in the future.

## **Learning Strategies**

The other factor that makes learner differences in the classroom is the learning strategies they used. Different students prefer using different strategies to learn the different language items. All the language learning strategies are grouped into three categories: memory strategies: grouping, associating, elaborating, placing new words into a context, using imagery, semantic mapping, using keywords, representing sound in memory, structured reviewing, using physical response or sensation, and using mechanical techniques: cognitive strategies: centering one's learning, arranging and planning one's learning and evaluating one's learning; and socio-affective strategies lowering one's anxiety, thinking positively, and keeping in touch with one's emotional stability (Brown, 2014, Cleeton, 2000; Oxford, 2002). All the learners do not want to follow the similar strategies, they have the will of adopting different strategies. While teaching the text, the students of T1, as T1 stated

preferred writing summaries in the notes books. T2 prefers underlining with red pen or highlighting on the text especially to the slogans and to the strong expressions. T3 stated that he often asks his students behave socially in the classroom, the politeness principles, reading through multiple sources, reading the text with sign-post questions or with comprehension questions. T4 stated that he has conducted different social activities such as making a dialogue or conversation, understanding how to initiate the conversation, when to take turn, how to be polite to others that come under social strategies. Here, the teachers showed that they conduct different activities in the classroom adopting different strategies.

### **Motivation**

Motivation is an internal drive (Brown, 2014) that leads students towards learning language items. One of the motivation types: intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative and instrumental (Harmer, 2007) encourages learners to learn attentively in the classroom. All the participants claimed that motivation is one of the learner difference factors that well motivated students are the good learners in the classroom in comparison to less motivated ones. T1 stated that students who learn for the better jobs in the future are highly competitive in the classroom. In this context T2 stated that students of good family background students are always motivated well and do the homework regularly.

T3 stated that some of the students are well motivated from their households who are interested in learning language items so that they will get good marks in the exam and get good opportunities or jobs in their future lives. Similarly, learning English for going to the foreign countries and to learn the target language culture and to have settlement in the abroad nations in order to make friendships with the people of the target language culture may be the expectations of many of the college level students as T4 stated; however, such motivation may discourage learners to do their daily homework, and they participate only in discussion and conversation. By the reasons of learner differences in classroom becomes generally problematic (Butlerman, 2004).

### **Personality**

Learners also differ in their learning due to their personality (Crozier, 1997) as all the participants agreed. In this context, T1 stated that some of the students in his classrooms are open, frank and want to be near to the teachers; and they also respect as well while in meeting. Further, they frankly want to discuss on the subject matter and on the project works outside the classroom as well. T2 stated that the students who are from well-educated family and from the parents of good economic condition come to school with high ambition and use polite expressions, so that other students automatically accept them as their leader among them. T3 further stated that some of the students in the classroom are introvert and some are extrovert. The extroverts are showy and helpful but the introverts speak little and not so active in the group works. In this way, they have little willingness to communicate.

In this context, T4 states that, some students are aggressive and make noises every time as they have unwillingness to learning in the classroom and they have very little ambition. All the participants agreed that personality is one of the important factors for explaining individual differences in second or foreign language learning. There are number of personality variables such as introversion, extroversion, risk-taking, tolerance of ambiguity and self-esteem (Ellis, 2004) that play in learner differences in the classroom. The unexpected temperament, the aggressiveness as T4 stated is related to the nature of the students that anxiety, emotions, feelings, beliefs, moods and attitudes, which greatly influences students behaviour can have negative impact like: language shock and culture shock (Aljasir, 2016)

while in language learning.

### **Norms, Values and Beliefs**

All the students agreed that learners' mind is set up with preoccupied knowledge on which they trusts. Schools in the context of Nepal as well are full of children who belong to different ethnicities who possess their own norms, values and beliefs. T1 stated that due to the norms, values and beliefs, one student in the classroom seems different from others. Different ethnic children may speak different languages as their mother tongues and while speaking Nepali and English in the classroom they use different accents as well. T1 further stated:

In the locality of our school, here are the people of Nepali, Newari and Gurung mother tongue speakers. Students also come from outside districts: Magdi and Baglung as well. I can easily identify the students' ethnicities not only through their appearance but with their accents. We can easily identify the minorities in the janajati group through their accent used in English speaking.

Here, T4 means that the matter is not who speaks what languages but who knows how many languages. The Nepali mother tongue speakers are generally bilinguals only, but the janajati children are the multi-linguals. These ideas can be equated to the idea that children's linguistic identities are their ethnic identities (Ellis, 2004) that are deeply entwined and full of norms, values and beliefs is a schooling experience (Gube, 2015).

Similar is the view of T2 as he stated that in the context of Nepal, ethnic minorities mostly resemble linguistic minorities and indigenous features that they belong to specific cultural background in a particular geographical setting. T3 also adds that ethnic children often share different specific cultures, norms, values and assumptions in their own particular groups. T4 adds that ethnic children may adopt their cultural stereotypical habits in their learning at school which may promote or hinder in English language learning. In this way, cultures norms and values do not always support language learning in the classroom but they can hinder as well when they think their stereotypes are the truths.

The view of T4 is supported by Edwards (2010) that the knowledge, attitudes and inclinations that arise in one setting may be inappropriate and distinctly disadvantageous in to another situation that children may feel isolated (Jule, 2004) from the main stream cluster as these are the symbolic differences (Kalantiz & Cope, 2016).

### **Inclusive Education: Management Approach**

Many of the teachers take learner differences in the classroom as an issue as it can create difficulties to the teachers to deal with various learners. In an inclusive classroom, learners with different characteristics stay together and participate in learning activities actively. To tackle or to manage this issue of learner differences, teachers, administrators and policy makers have to do a lot as all the participants agreed. In this context T1 stated:

Just as one person differs from the other in the society, in the same way, one student differs from other in terms of various factors. A teacher should not be afraid of this situation. It is the result of individual differences that exist among children. To tackle with the situation, awareness programmes for in-service and pre-service teachers is essential.

Different learners have different expectations, attitudes, feelings, intelligences and emotions, however, such learner differences should not always be taken as the problems. Perhaps, they may

create imbalances, but teachers can recognize their impacts in the classroom aware the teachers. Not only teachers, in the initial classes but also students may also feel odd and scared seeing other students with different accents, different habits as well, however they can be overcome being aware of the issue (Petruskevich, 1997). In addition to T1, T2 stated:

Differences can be taken as the resources to be used in the classroom. A classroom is full of variety; it can be taken as the boon as well. A well-motivated and the brilliant student helps to the less motivated and the dull students. Less motivated students can copy the attitudes of the talent ones when teacher gives opportunities to share the ideas and experiences of the brighter ones in the classroom.

To tackle the issue, teacher can form pairs and the groups with full of varieties of learners, only then the emotions and the attitudes of one learner can be acknowledged by the other. By doing this, one student can learn the other classmates being in near with them. Teacher can mix the students together who have different ideas, perspectives, and worldviews (Solheim, 2017).

T3 talks about the policy level ideas that we have different varieties of learners in a small single classroom. To know about the various aspects of the different students and to be accustomed with their cultural and attitudinal differences, T3 further claimed that inclusive education is the need of today's education policy that students from different communities stay together, cooperate together and learn in the same classroom environment and teachers can assign several tasks and activities. By doing this, teachers can address the individual differences and deal with students' diverse learning progress by conducting parent-teacher help and school supporting programme that contribute on giving extra help to the students who were lagging behind, and giving extra works to the students who learned faster (Wu et al., 2012).

Different learners have different needs in the single classroom, and those needs cannot be fulfilled at a time as T4 stated. T4 further elaborated that different students may have several needs from basic to high level i.e. from basic classroom needs to needs of technologies that are costly, however, they can be supplied as per the strength of the needs as T4 stated. This is a serious challenge for teachers, however, the supplement of interpersonal needs of adolescents and young adults can be used in student engagement activities in and outside the classrooms.

The opinion of T4 welcomes the ideas of diversity training (Thomas & Chennapragada, 2018) that sufficient trainings are to be given to both students and teachers to make them able to work in harmony with students in the classrooms and make them aware of their cultures, their backgrounds and potential conflicts. The diversity training is synonymous to diversity education that it helps in addressing social differences on ethnicity, religion, culture, genders, age, and socioeconomic classes of learners (Gambhir, 2015). The differences due to those factors are primarily the individual and group differences.

The participants agreed on exposing the policy of inclusive education that the classroom include all the learners of the same proficiency and guarantee their rights to access, presence, participation and success in the classroom and the whole school environment (Slee, 2018) that the public schools have 'zero-rejection' policy as a result all children are equally welcomed and valued, and get opportunities to contribute equally to learning activities and events.



## Conclusion and Implications

Dealing with learner differences in ELT classroom is an issue. By understanding learner differences, factors that create learner differences and the knowledge of inclusive education to manage the classroom and deal with learner differences, a teacher can easily tackle with the learners in the classroom. Learners are of various age, intelligence, learning style, personality, and motivation. They adopt different strategies, norms, values and assumptions. Realizing these differences, EFL teachers can adopt the policy of inclusive education in the classroom and deal with the varieties of learners in the classroom.

This article provides insights into the situation of existence of learner differences and learning style differences in the classroom which is a trouble to the English language teachers. For that, the only better solution is to train the teachers in adopting inclusive education in the classrooms in Nepal. On the basis of the findings of this study, it is concluded that English language teachers are to be well aware of on learner's individual differences and especially their learning style differences by recognizing their individual needs, and to be well prepared to address the students' needs. So that they will be able to face English language classroom situations of heterogeneous community.

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