



Challenges and Opportunities of Learning English in Multicultural Classrooms: Debre Markos University in

Focus: By: Yigzaw Kerebih, Department of English Language and Literature

Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to find out the challenges and opportunities of learning English in a multicultural classroom of first year Debre Markos University students. To achieve the objective of the study, a descriptive research design was used. Accordingly, data was collected from first year Debre Markos University students. Twenty-four students who have low participation in English class were selected using purposive sampling technique. From these participants, data were collected using observation, interview and focus group discussion. After the data was collected, it was analyzed qualitatively through explanation, description, narration and quotation by classifying the phenomenon into different thematic areas. From the analysis of qualitative data, it was found that learning in a multicultural classroom has become a challenge of learning English as a foreign language. Cultural differences among students, lack of confidence, negative attitude of students towards the process of learning English and weak linguistic backgrounds of students were the common challenges that affected students' learning in multicultural classrooms. In spite of these challenges, it was found that multicultural classroom created conducive learning environments for students who have different learning experiences and abilities. It helped to create learner autonomy/independent learning. Finally, it was found that students used their own strategies like self-regulated learning/independent learning, getting support from senior students and reading different materials to solve the problems of learning English in multicultural classrooms. Thus, the study has implications for the English language teaching and learning in diversified EFL classrooms. It will help both English language teachers and students to design different teaching and learning strategies used in multicultural classrooms.

Key words: multicultural classrooms, English language learning, diversified learners

1. Introduction

The demand for learning and teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) has steadily increased throughout the world (Dorathy and Mahalakshimi, 2011; Garton, Coplind and Burns, 2011). There are different reasons for this

demand. One is that English language has become the most important means of international communication (Dorathy and Mahalkshim 2011; Garton, Copland and Burns 2013). For this reason, many people consider English language as “an asset for diplomacy, foreign relation and a passport for the advancement of global media and entertainment”. Secondly, the desire to learn English has increased as it has a great role in academia. Different research findings show that learning English increases the overall communication and problem solving abilities of students in their academic activities; it increases learners’ creativity, cognitive and affective development (Garton, Coplind and Burns 2011). Moreover, having good command of English creates better job opportunities for graduates (Garton, Coplind and Burns 2013; Pinion and Hydon 2010).

In addition, the teaching and learning of English have currently increased in multicultural or multilingual classrooms due to increased mobility of people and closely linkage of countries in economic, social and political values. Thus, learning English in a multicultural classroom has become a common agenda in different countries (Patil, 2008). This, in turn, helps learners to acquire more than one language. Learning different languages, on the other hand, helps learners create different kinds of connections in the brain.

Paik(2008)also shows that the teaching and learning of English in diversified classes has become most common in national and international universities. The different customs, traditions, languages and values each student owns make all students have unique approach to learning, cognition and achievement (Holtzman, 2009). Likewise, Ethiopia, a vast country with the highest population, diverse culture and language has taught English as it has different roles for the country. It has a great role in social, economic, political and education affairs of the country (Bacharo 2014; Dawit 2013; MOE 2013). Emphasizing the different roles English language plays in a country, Jha (2014:10) states “Metaphorically, the way oxygen is important to survive, so is English to survive in today’s competitive world.” So, considering the above roles of English language, Ethiopia introduced the teaching and learning of English at the early age, and it has wealth experience in teaching English as a foreign language.

However, the teaching and learning of English has become a great challenge in universities where diversified students are found. Jha (2013) and Meseret (2012) found that Ethiopian students’ English language proficiency level is low and students could not master English language easily. The government and employers also claim that university students’ and graduates’ English language proficiency is not ready to meet the industrial, business and international trade society English language needs (Mijena, 2014). The researchers’ teaching experience also shows that the problem has become more severe in EFL classes where culturally and linguistically diversified students are found. In these diversified classrooms, students usually prefer to do tasks individually rather than in group. When group work, debate, pair work, group presentation or whole class discussion was given, most of the students prefer to do individually.

The researcher’s teaching experiences also indicated that there are four types of EFL learners in one EFL classroom: students who can speak two local languages and English, students who can communicate using only their mother tongue, students who cannot communicate using English and other local language except their mother tongue and those who cannot communicate using English. Because of these problems, students have become passive listeners when inter-active learning methods were applied in English classrooms. To solve such problems, Atkinson (1987), Schweer and William (1999) and Ferrer (2000) suggested that both the teacher and the students need to use mother tongue in EFL classroom. They spotlight learners acquire second/ foreign language by using the knowledge they already have of their native languages. However, as the researcher observed the actual EFL classrooms, it is difficult to enhance English learning using mother tongue because the class is linguistically diversified. Therefore, the researcher was initiated to assess the challenges and opportunities students face to learn English in diversified classrooms.

2. Research questions

This study addressed the following three research questions.

1. What are the challenges that affect students' English language learning in multicultural classrooms?
2. What are the opportunities used to enhance students' English language learning in multicultural classroom?
3. What strategies do students use to alleviate the challenges they face in multicultural classrooms?

3. The Research Methodology

3.1 The Research Design

This research is descriptive research design. The researcher selected this research as it is suitable to describe the existing challenges and opportunities of learning English in multicultural classrooms.

3.2 Samples and Sampling Techniques of Study

The participants of the study were 24 first year students who learned English at the beginning of the semester in 2017. The researcher selected those students using purposive sampling technique from four sections he had taught. Purposive sampling was used as the researcher focused on students who had great problem in learning English students who came from different regions (Amhara, Oromia, Tigray and Sothern Ethiopia) speak different languages.

3.3 DataCollection Instruments

Observation, interview and focus group discussion were used as data collection methods for the study. The observation data was collected while the teaching learning process was going until the researcher obtained saturated data. After each observation, the researcher collected data using semi-structured interview questions. These questions were preparedbased on the review of literature and researcher's teaching experience. Later, the items were translated into Amharic believing that the items might not be clear for students and in case more replies might be withheld for lack of expressions. Moreover, students who werenot much proficient in Amharic were interviewed using their mother tongue with the help of translators. Then, their responses were translated into English before analysis. The interview data were collected afterthe researcher made classroom observations. That is, when a researcher observedlearning problems on students while he was teaching, he interviewed two or three students after class. This instrument was used to capture their views and voices on the challenges and opportunities students face during learning English in multicultural classes.

The items of focus group discussion were prepared based on the main areas the study focused. This method was used as it was appropriate to find out the challenges and opportunities students faced when they learned English in multicultural classroom. The participants of study were students who speak Amharic but who came from different cultural backgrounds. The focus group discussion was taken place after the course was completed.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data obtained from three data collection methods were analyzed qualitatively. To do this, the following processes were employed. First, the researchers transcribed, edited and formatted the verbal data to make them suitable for analysis. Second, close reading of the raw data was done to identify the themes and details. Third, the raw data were coded and categorized into meaningful units. That is, data were categorized and related to answer the research questions. Fourth, since some text segments could be coded into more than one category, the results found in each item were again categorized. Finally, all the categories were revised and refined. This involved the selection of appropriate quotes that would carry core themes. Finally, all the categories were revised, refined and presented through narration, quotation, explanation and thematic analysis. The direct quotations obtained from different respondents were presented by translating into English.

4 Results and Discussions

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Challenges of Learning English in Multicultural Classrooms

As emerged from data analysis, the major challenges that affected students' English language learning in a multicultural classroom were the presence of diversified and weak linguistic background students, lack of confidence and negative attitude of students to learn English in a multicultural classroom. The table below shows the major and the sub-themes emerged from the thematic data analysis.

Table 1: Challenges Faced by First Year DMU Students to Learn English in Multicultural Classrooms

No.	Major themes	Sub-themes
1	Diversity of students	Varied abilities and learning experiences
		Varied learning styles among students
		Unfamiliarity among freshman students
2	Weak English language backgrounds	Communication barrier
		Less knowledge in grammar
		Less knowledge in vocabulary
		Influence of mother tongue
3	Lack of confidence	Stereotype interaction
		Afraid of criticism
		Stress, frustration
		shyness
4	Negative attitude of students	teaching methods
		classroom tasks/activities
		diversified classrooms
5	Multilingualism	different linguistic backgrounds
		interaction problem
		focus on mother tongue

4.1.1.1 Diversity of students

Students' diversity has become one of the foremost themes of the data. Difference of students' learning abilities and experiences, varied learning styles among students and unfamiliarity among students are the major challenges negatively affected English language learning. The participants claim that the way they learned their mother tongue and English in lower grades and in the university was different. When they learned English in primary or secondary schools, they and their English language teachers used students' mother tongue. Two participants clearly show this difference in their verbatim expression:

“When I was learning English in primary and secondary schools, I and my teacher usually used my first language in EFL classroom, particularly when group work, pair work, individual work and whole class discussion were given. Now, however, I cannot use my mother tongue to express my feeling as other students and the teacher cannot speak my first language.”

Another participant also stated:

“The way I learned English in lower grades is different from the way I learn English in the university. In primary and secondary schools, I used my mother tongue to do the tasks. However, at present, I cannot use my mother tongue in EFL classroom as my teacher and most of my classmates cannot speak the same language. This makes my English learning difficult.”

Differences of students' learning styles and experiences were the other problems that affected students' learning of English. It was reported that their learning style was different from other students' learning styles. This learning difference hindered students to use inter-active learning methods that enhance English language learning. This in turn causes to occur less/no interaction among students. Two participants in focus group discussion stated:

S1: "I do not like to do tasks/activities in groups. Rather, I prefer to learn individually."

S2: *The teacher usually encourages us to communicate using English language. But I become nervous when I want to speak in front of my teacher and classmates. So I prefer to do tasks individually and get feedback from my teacher.*

The unfamiliarity among students in EFL classroom also affected students' English language learning. The respondents replied that they were not much aware about their classmates' behavior and their language. This made them feel terrified on students who did not speak the same language. It was also observed that there was a communication gap among students who came from different linguistic backgrounds. In light of this, three participants in focus group discussion stated:

P1: "I am afraid of talking with my group members as I am not familiar with them, and my language is different from them. Even I think that I may be wrong if I talk about a particular issue."

P2: "I rarely talk with my group members as I do not know their behavior."

P3: "When a group is formed, I usually sit with my classmates who come from my region and speak the same language."

4.1.1.2 Weak English Language Background of Students

The data obtained from interview, observation and focus group discussion indicated that students' weak English background was the other major problem that distressed students' English language learning. They had a communication barrier with their classmates and their teachers. Their low proficiency in English language made them not to communicate effectively and learn English in the classroom. They responded that limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge, inability of articulating English words correctly and inability to speak English language fluently were the major problems of learning English in a diversified classroom. Two interviewees explained their problems as follows.

S3: "My mother tongue adversely affected my English pronunciation. Sometimes I want to speak in English, but I am afraid of criticisms of my classmates."

S4: *I do not have much problem in understanding the lesson. However, I cannot speak in English because of my weak linguistic background. My mother tongue also influences and inhibits my English pronunciation.*

The observation data also showed that some students were reluctant to speak in English as they are not sure on their accuracy and fluency of their speech.

4.1.1.3 Lack of Confidence

Lack of confidence also emerged as the other major theme that affected students' English language learning in multicultural classrooms. Students who learned in multi-cultural classroom were more likely passive listeners. The observation data showed that they were not actively involving in doing different activities, they felt stress when they attempted to speak, they were frustrated and stressed when they worked with other students, and most of them were reluctant to participate in group activities. When some of the students were interviewed after observation the reasons they were not participating actively in EFL classrooms, they stated that they did these as they were not sure about their command of English.

4.1.1.4 Negative Attitude of Students towards Teaching and Learning Process

The patterns and themes emerged from the interview and focus group discussion data revealed that attitude was the other challenge that affected students' English language learning. Though most of the students had positive attitude to learn English, they were not interested in engaging in the tasks used for learning English. Students had also a negative attitude towards the teaching methods employed in EFL classrooms. They preferred individual work to other interactive methods. It was also observed that students gave little attention to any of the interactive teaching methods used to facilitate English learning.

4.1.2.5 Multilingualism

As emerged from the themes of the finding, the study revealed that multilingualism had become another challenge of learning English. The respondents complained that they could not achieve the objectives of learning English as they did not have common language for effective communication. When students of different linguistic backgrounds engaged in group work, they spoke using neither English nor another common language.

4.2 Opportunities of Learning English in Multicultural Classroom

Even though the study revealed that learning English in multicultural classroom has many challenges, it has also its own merits. Some of the participants stated that learning in a diversified classroom is enjoyable and helpful to learn from other's experience. Working with students having varied abilities and learning experiences encouraged the students to help each other. Students also learned English by appreciating other's customs, traditions and values. It was also found that learning in a diversified EFL classroom enhances learner autonomy. This in turn, helps learners to use their own strategies of learning and inquires a student what is his/her best method of learning and experience. They also added that learning in a diversified classroom fosters friendship among students.

4.3 Strategies of Solving Challenges in a Diversified Classroom

Though most of the students responded they did not use any strategy, some respondents replied they used different strategies like independent learning, getting support from senior students and reading different materials.

5. Discussion

The data collected from interview, focus group discussion and observation indicated that learning English in a multicultural EFL context has become an enormous challenge for first year students though it helps to create some conducive learning environments of English. Students' cultural background difference is one of the major challenges that adversely affect students' learning. Learners are different in their learning styles, learning experiences, abilities, ethnicity and learner motivation. These differences make students face ambiguity and inconsistency in their learning. They reported that they cannot understand the lessons since their learning styles, learning experiences and abilities are different from other students' learning styles. Regarding this, Brown (2007) and Cooper (2001) found out that identifying students' learning styles and matching them with teachers' teaching styles make the teaching and learning process easier.

The participants also explained that the way they learned their mother tongue and English in primary and secondary schools and in university is different. While they were learning English in primary and secondary schools, they used their mother tongue, but they rarely use it now. For this reason, they hardly interact with their teacher and their group members. In light of this, Atkinson (1987) points out that using mother tongue in EFL classroom makes the lesson clear. Learners acquire second or foreign language by using the knowledge they already have of their native language. Others also found that there is an inter-dependence between mother tongue and foreign language learning (Cummins, 1977, 1984; Cook, 1991).

Students' weak English background was another challenge for learning English in multicultural classrooms. It was found that students have some severe problems in English language. They have shortage of vocabulary and grammar knowledge resulting in problem of fluency and difficulty of articulating English words, so they are hesitant to speak or to write in English. Similarly, Rasheed et al (2017) found that students' weak linguistic background is the challenge for teaching English in multicultural classroom.

Lack of confidence has also become the other challenge of learning English in a multicultural classroom. Students believed that their classmates criticized and underestimated them if they articulated English words wrongly. They felt mistrust even if their teacher gave them positive feedback. In relation to this, it was found out that individuals who view themselves as ineffective tend to limit their behavior of involving in a task. However, Bandura (1997) and Beck (1997) note that students who are confident about their competence will try to find out different ways of controlling the environment in which they learn and gain the desired performance. Students' attitude on different aspects of learning English has also become the challenge of learning English. Students have negative attitude towards the processes of teaching and learning English. That is, students are not interested in the teaching methods such as group work, pair work and group discussion and the tasks given in each of these methods of teaching English.

To alleviate the above mentioned challenges of learning English in multicultural classrooms, students reported that they used their own learning strategies. These include independent learning (self-learning), asking senior students and reading different materials. Though learning English in a multicultural classroom has the above mentioned challenges, it was found that multiculturalism has its own advantage. Some of the respondents replied that learning in culturally diversified classroom is enjoyable and helpful for learning English. It helps them to know other cultures so that they learn English by appreciating others' culture. Moreover, students learn best when they engage with students who have different learning abilities and experiences.

6 Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

Based on the findings and discussions, it was concluded that learning English in a multicultural EFL context has become a great challenge though it provides some opportunities of learning English. One of the challenges students face in EFL classroom was the difficulty of learning English with students who have diversified backgrounds. Students faced a problem of matching their learning styles, experiences and abilities with others. These in turn, made them feel discomfort, uncertain and uneasiness to communicate easily with their group members. Differences in linguistic backgrounds and language abilities also negatively affected their learning. Students have shortage of English grammar and vocabulary knowledge, a problem of articulating English words and a problem of speaking fluently. Because of these problems, students have developed low confidence and felt stress, frustration and criticism in EFL classroom. It was also investigated that students are not interested in the tasks and methods applied in EFL classrooms. These in turn, make them have negative attitude on the process of English language teaching and learning. In spite of these challenges, the respondents reported that learning in multicultural classroom has some merits. They reported that they learn best as they engage with students who have different cultural backgrounds, learning abilities and learning experiences.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations were made.

- EFL Teachers should have awareness that students with different cultural backgrounds have different needs. Then, they need to discuss with students and fellow teachers on group formation, use of interactive methods/

specific teaching methods, interpersonal cues and preparation of multilingual materials to create a positive classroom atmosphere and to cater the needs of diverse students.

- EFL teachers also regularly have to deal with tensions concerning students with different backgrounds and find out the ways of minimizing students' anxiety of language learning.
- Ministry of educations should provide options for training practices, mentoring programs, in service workshops and seminars for teachers to solve problems of multicultural EFL classrooms.
- Students should be confident as their language learning can be enhanced when they practice the target language confidently. Moreover, they should be aware the merits of learning in a multicultural classroom, appreciate the values of cultural diversities and develop their own strategies of learning.
- University administrators should help students promote awareness and understanding of diversity. They should also strive to build a school culture that is inclusive and respectful for all students.
- Another study should be conducted using wider sample of students at national or regional level by incorporating all groups of students: high, medium and low achievers.

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