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Managing Large Heterogeneous Second Language Classrooms: Problems with Teaching and Eclectic Solutions

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Abstract

The increase in population and the demand to study for various purposes has immensely contributed to classroom population in India. The varied interest among learners, their social background, attitude, and abilities, are to be looked by teacher. Teacher cannot blindfold to these differences. Heterogeneous classrooms are inevitable in India, which stands for Unity in Diversity. The aim to address the mixed atmosphere where each student feels welcomed and accepted with his/her capabilities under one roof becomes a challenge to a teacher. Hence answering this phenomenon is essential. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part discusses, what is a large class and heterogeneous class in Indian conditions in relation to other developing and developed countries. In the second part, discusses about the elements of heterogeneity. The third part presents the methodology used for this study such as informal interviews, discussions among 44 teachers from five colleges who teach to a large heterogeneous class. The collected data was analysed, how teachers manage those problems in the large classes given to them. As a result, the researcher also has given solution to manage those problems with the Eclectic Approach.

Key words: Large Class, Heterogeneous, Eclectic Approach, Mixed- abilities, individual differences.

1.1 Introduction

In the 21st century due to the vast increase in population, the demand to study for various purposes and compulsory education policies in different countries enormously contributed to the uncontrollable classroom strength in the educational arena. Large classes are the inevitable reality in most of the educational institution in many part of the contemporary world. The current situations in the language classrooms and the varied interest among language learners, their knowledge, social background, attitude, abilities, and motivation are to be looked at by a teacher. A teacher cannot blindfold him/herself to all these differences. Heterogeneous classrooms are inevitable in India, a country that stands for this motto Unity in Diversity. The aim to address a mixed atmosphere in which each student feels welcomed and accepted with his or her own capabilities and to teach them under one roof becomes a challenging phenomenon for a teacher. Hence answering this phenomenon is essential. Those situations are generally believed to be posing a lot of challenges and problems to the teachers and students.

1.2 Large Class

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There are no commonly held definitions for this term 'large class' but it varies context-to-context. Here is the summary of the comprehensive understanding, which has been discussed by the senior academics at Moi University in Kenya in a workshop organized by UNESCO (n.d) on teaching and learning in higher education. In their attempt to define a large class, they spelt out these following perceptive since, they did not believe in a single definition:

1. There is nothing like a large class. The large class is only in the mind of the orthodox teacher;
2. A large class is one with more students than available facilities can support;
3. A large class has more than 100 students enrolled;
4. There is no fixed number. The large class depends on the discipline-smaller number for engineering, science and medicine and large number for arts, humanities, and social sciences. (http://www.unesco-bamako.org/guide/fp/ modules.pdf)

Ur (1996) registers his view on large class like this; "the exact number does not really matter: what matters is how you see the class size in your own specific situation" (p. 302). Baker and Westrup (2000) say that "a large class can be any number of students, if the teacher feels there are too many students for them all to make progress"(p. 2).

Hence, this term large class is relative. However, the class size is a major concern to any educational system. Let us look into the statistical data of other countries and their average class size. Large classes in not a new entity, almost all developing countries face this challenging issue in schools and colleges. It is really a burden to teachers. Teachers feel difficult to accommodate all the learners in learning activity or providing opportunities are tough within the stipulated time. Are these problems are only in developing countries or in developed countries too? Let this data given above will make our queries clear. The developed countries' average class size are given above, this data is adapted from *The New York Times* from the article Class size around the world by Catherine Rampell (2009, September, 11).

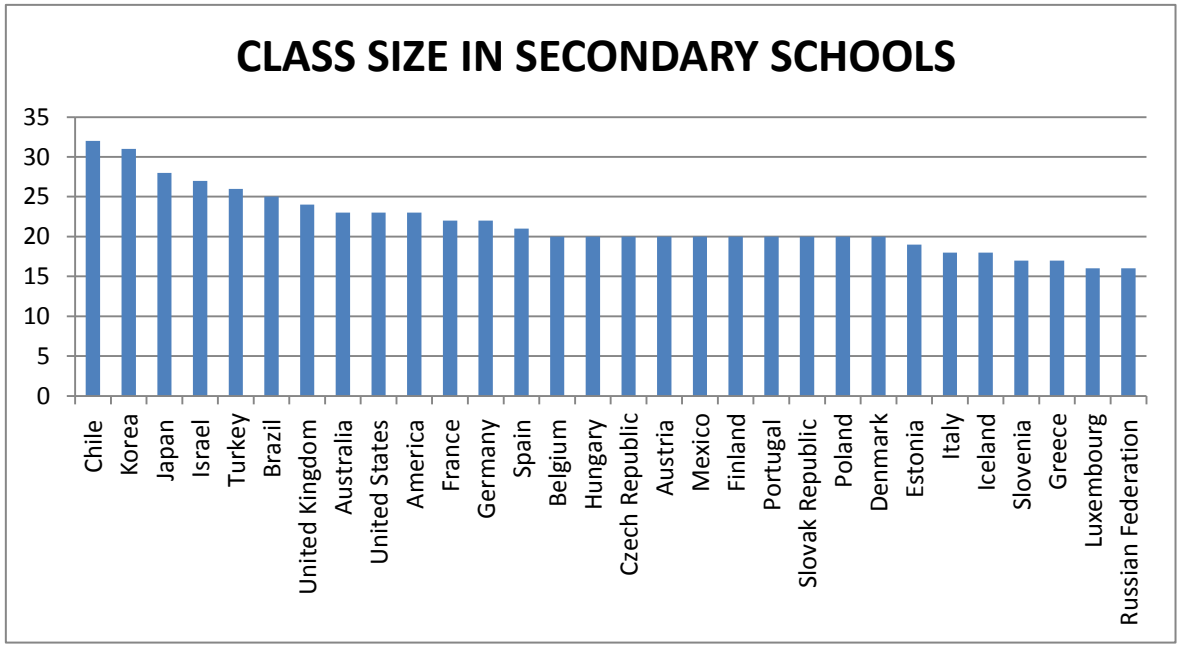


Figure - 1

The graph above clearly shows the average class size of the developed countries. From the above graph, it is vivid that the developed countries average head count does not

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exceed 35 per class. The class size is not only changing to country-to-country but also it changes as years go by with in the country too. The head count of the student does not have a negative impact per se. What matters is teachers' and students' perception about large class affects their teaching and learning progress.

As *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning* (2013) states, large classes are generally measured to be problematic for language learning. It states that, "the smaller the class, the better the learning" (n.p). In Indian context how big a large class is? This question set the tone for this research endeavour. As UNESCO Bangkok (2006, p. 1) states that, in some countries "25-30 student per one teacher is considered large, while in other countries this is seen to be normal or even quite small". This may vary according to the course and the learning situations. For some learning situations, 30 students may be large for a class, for some 40-50. The recommendation of University Grant Commission (UGC) about the student and teacher ratio for a higher education class is shocking. In *The New Indian Express* in an article entitled "Pupil-Teacher Ratio Poor in Tamil Nadu Public Universities" by Sushmitha Ramakrishnan (2018, September 9) records the student-teacher ratio as 20:1. However, the recent survey conducted by All India Survey for higher Education (AISHE) records the ratio of Tamil Nadu in higher education is higher than 19 states in India and higher than the national average of about 46:1. Hence according to the national average of students per class are around 50. However, most of the class in the Undergraduate (UG) level is above 50 in Tamil Nadu. The admission to a UG class in Tamil Nadu universities and colleges are invariably above 50 hence, answering this issue is essential.

1.3 Heterogeneous Classroom

The fear of not able to give what they look for, to give what they lack and practice and correct what they learn, which is by and large psychological in nature, this fear creeps into a teacher when he/she steps into a large classroom. This fear intensifies when the teacher hears these following statements while handling classes to the undergraduate students. *We have studied this earlier. It's easy, we know it already. We do not know this.* These three statements are the real complaints which the teachers hear and do not know how to manage. When analysing the above complaints they can be put under one idea i.e. these complaints of indicates the learners differences that exists in a class. It exposes how varied the students learning capacity within a single class. This varied learning style among students perplexes the teacher one who teaches. Sometimes listening to such statements from the students, teachers do look for diverse means and ask themselves, what shall I do next? to meet up the students needs and fail by saying *I am done* they exhaust all they have and go fruitless for their efforts. So, when thinking of a large class there raises a question into the teacher's mind, that is; Is a large class is a heterogeneous class?

As Penny Ur (1991) says invariably, almost all the large classes are heterogeneous in nature. In the general sense, when a class is composed of different learners who are differing from one another in some way or the other in their strengths, weaknesses and approaches to learning in one single learning environment are said to be heterogeneous. Ur (1988, p. 302) states, "heterogeneous class is one that has deferent learners in it".

According to Ainslie (1994), views on heterogeneity is summed up in this way, heterogeneous classes are those which accommodates different types of learners in their skills, background, interest, personalities and learning needs. How to answer this problematic situation in teaching is a search among the researchers in the recent times. One among such search is this research paper.

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Trying to answer the heterogeneity in the Indian condition places two obstacles in front the researcher. One cannot change the educational polices that a state or a nation possess. Secondly, India is a country that embraces 'Unity in Diversity'. This is the highest hallmark, which almost grabbed the attention of several other countries. Hence, in a country like India, the large heterogeneous language classrooms are inevitable, but one can easily turn up to a person to solve this issue of heterogeneity. In all these classes apart from the policies, institution, administrative authorities, syllabus and textbooks, the last and the final authority who decides what to teach and how to teach to students are teachers. The teachers depend on different language teaching methods to teach. Hence choosing a right method that suits their situation will produce better results. To arrive at a solution, viewing the differences that teachers face uniquely, which are inevitable in the Indian classrooms a survey was conducted.

1.3.1 Methodology

A mixed methodology is being adopted to study the problem of the large heterogeneous classrooms in undergraduate level. For this study, the researcher has chosen 44 teachers from five Different Arts and Science Colleges in Trichy. A survey, questionnaire, informal interview, group discussions are taken as the research tools to meet the research data and with the data an analysis is made to ensure the research results. To validate the research data secondary resources were being adapted to this research.

1.3.2 Composition of a Heterogeneous Class: a Survey

There are no homogenous classes exist in the real world, since there are no two learners who are analogous in their learning and other abilities. More than one learner in a class is automatically heterogeneous in nature. Students from multi-social, economical, cultural, and educational and psychological background are being the regular students to our post schooling courses. Putting them under one roof for teaching and making them feel comfortable is a daily challenge for teachers. To intensify the study and to identify the composition of the heterogeneity an open-ended question was raised to the teachers who are teaching in undergraduate level. At random, the researcher asked them to list out the differences that they find among the students who are coming to acquire degree in their institutions. These are the major things that the teachers registered in their script that contributes to the heterogeneous nature of a large class in their classes. They get students from these categories;

Table – 1

S.no	Heterogeneous elements	Different Categories
1	Gender	Boys, girls, transgender
2	Speak different L1	Tamil, English, Malayalam, Telugu and Hindi
3	Different boards	State Board (Regional Language + Matriculations), CBSE, CISCE/ICSE/ISC,IB
4	Different economical society	Rural, Urban, Semi-Urban
5	Location of institutions	Rural, Urban, Semi-Urban
6	Institution's Nature	Co-ed, Boys, Girls
7	Medium of instructions	Mother Tongue, Bilingual, English
8	Learning abilities	Advance, Average, Poor
9	Self Discipline	Excellent, Moderate, Poor
10	Parents' Support	Excellent, Moderate, Poor
11	Interest, Confidence, Motivation	Good, Average, Poor

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12	Learning Experience	useful (pleasant, demanding, boring))

No one deny the fact that teaching large classes are challenging job for a teacher. As Ayeni and Olowe (2016) state that, the increase in population in learning institutions affects the class sizes, the performance of students become an issue. The teachers feel that these are the 12 main streams that contribute to the heterogeneous nature of a class. The above 12 categories in the list are not the complete list of element that determines the heterogeneity in a language classroom. Yet, these are the common elements that was repeatedly hit the discussion of the teachers in the discussion secession and in their list. Teachers feel that these problems and issues sprout from the big stem called the Different boards.

1.3.4 Intake from Different Boards: Some Concerns

Around the world there are three basic types of education service is rendered to the people they are, public, private and home learning environments. India is also a country among them. The sorry state of Indian condition in giving quality education at the public schools is a total failure. Parents, students run after the private schools for admission, on the other hand public schools (government schools) are running sort of students. Even the government teachers are not admitting their children in the government schools. Private institutions only take up CBSE board. Hence, the poor children are not able to get those opportunities as other economically well to do students. The CBSE boards are located at cities and economically well to do localities their presence in rural places are very very less.

The problems that teachers spelt out are in comparison with the private schools:

01. Disciplinary problems
02. Gender issues
03. Learning experience differs
04. Motivation, interest, confidence lacks
05. Less infrastructure and opportunities
06. World Knowledge is less
07. Groupism
08. Attitude
09. Parents involvement in students' growth is less
10. Skills and abilities vary
11. Social relationship problems

The values of the Problems are in Percentage (P 1, P2..... refers to problems 1 in the graph) When we see all these above said points as problems, they are very high in government schools. It does not mean that in other private and home schools, it does not exist but they exist in a minimum level. So, when mixtures of these kinds of students come under one roof

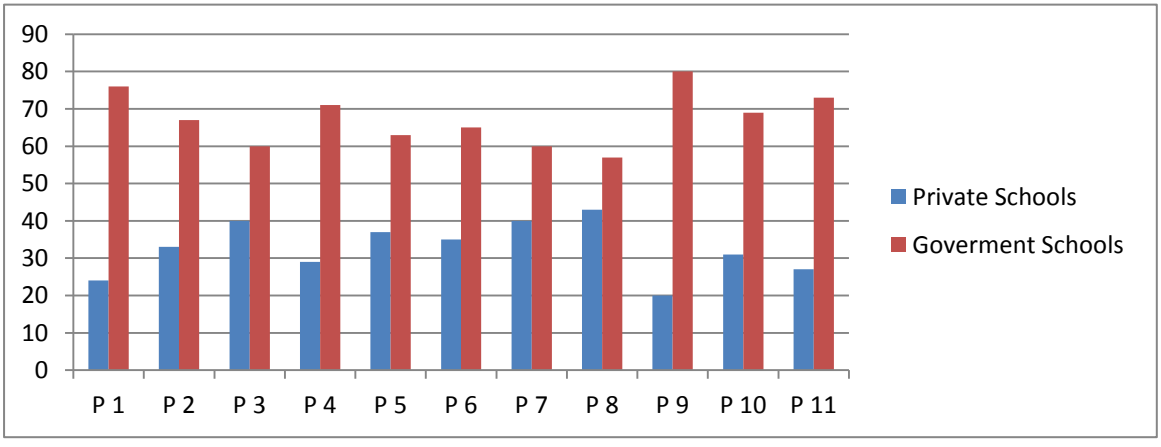


Figure - 2

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for higher education the teachers are helpless in providing effective and equal learning for all the students. What are the other problems that teachers identify in the large heterogeneous classes while teaching? These are the problems stated by teachers in the discussion.

1.3.5 Findings

These are the most affecting problems identified by the researcher in the large heterogeneous classrooms.

- Error correction is difficult;
- Gender bias exists;
- The involvement of the poor students is less when motivation is not there;
- Individual difference are over looked by teachers when handling class;
- Homogenous textbook cannot solve the heterogeneous problems;
- Exam and evaluation focuses on one skill (writing);
- Language biased;
- Students attitude towards learning a language varies;
- Pervious linguistic knowledge are overlooked;
- Access to technology is very less;
- Groupism; (based on language, culture, religion and native)
- Students go idle in the lager class when they do not like a class;
- It is hard to practice all the learnt language items in the stipulated time;
- Most of our language classes turn to be lecturing rooms;

How to minimize these problems faced by teachers as the daily challenges in their language classes is a real question. It is very clear that all these problems take deep root in one single problem. In the initial stages the teachers fail to address the individual differences of the students, by and large this issue turns to be a big challenge in the course of time as the course progresses. Before the teachers realize this problem, it has grown to be a big issue. To mend and to bring back to a shape teachers are in search of a perfect or a suitable method that which help them to teach to the heterogeneous students and to produce best outcome. As Kumaravidelu (2003, p. 30) states, "Justifiable dissatisfaction with established methods inevitably and increasingly led practicing teachers to rely on their intuitive ability and experiential knowledge". The culmination of intuitive ability and the experiential knowledge inherently exists in an eclectic teacher. As a result, while looking for a best method that will suit the heterogeneous classroom in the language teaching, is "eclectic approach". How this theory will be a natural choice for teachers to solve all their heterogeneous teaching problems will be discussed below.

1.4 Eclectic Method: A Natural Solution

Kumar C., P. (2013) asserts, "Eclectic Method is a popular method these days because students are heterogeneous and versatile level intelligent in the classroom" (p. 1). The teachers, who teach in these situations, have gone through enough of group discussion and debate and readily accepted the eclectic method do lessen their daily challenges of language teaching in the heterogeneous classes. Definition of the term 'Eclectic' will throw some comprehensive clarity to understand the following analysis in right way. Kumar (2013) defines eclectic method like this "it is a combination of different method of teaching and learning approaches" (p 1). As Al Hamash (1985); Larsen-Freeman (2000) and Mellow

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(2000) stated that in the different and varied situations of language teaching the use of a variety of language learning activities that are different in its nature and characteristics can only licensed by the eclectic approach. Gao (2011) defines eclectic approach as "not a concrete, single method, but a method, which combines listening, speaking, reading, and writing and includes some practice in the classroom" (p. 1). The main essence of eclectic Approach is summarised by Wali (2009) like this;

> ... Teachers should know that they have the right to choose the best methods and techniques in any method according to learners' needs and learning situation. Teachers can adopt a flexible method and technique so as to achieve their goals. They may choose whatever works best at particular time in a particular situation. (p. 40)

It is very vivid that an eclectic teacher should possess a comprehensive knowledge of different methods to be an eclectic teacher. A partial knowledge on different methods may lead to many other problems, hence understanding the features of eclectic approach may lead the teachers in a right way to choose this method as the right choice.

1.4.1 Salient Features of Eclectic Approaches

a) Teachers are given a chance to choose different kinds of teaching techniques in a period to reach the aims of the lesson.
b) There is flexibility in choosing any aspect of method that teachers think suitable for teaching inside the classroom.
c) Learners can see different kinds of teaching techniques, using different kinds of teaching aids, that help to make lessons much more stimulating and ensures better understanding of the material on the other hand.
d) Solving difficulties that may emerge from the presentation of the textbook materials.
e) It saves both time and effort in the presentation of language activities. (Ali, 1981, p. 7)

These features will surely cater to the needs of the heterogeneous teachers' and the students' needs. Now with this understanding on eclectic approach let us venture into how this eclectic approach can make the teachers to reach the needs of the heterogeneous learners.

1.5 Analysis of the Problems and Eclectic Solutions

This analysis is made out of the points, suggestions, recommendations, experience, observations, feedbacks and perceptions of 44 teachers (teach in the heterogeneous language classrooms) who put forwarded in the discussion sessions. The primary and the phenomenal claim that all the 44 teachers juxtaposed throughout the discussions and interview was this; *teachers should spend time to understand the students' pervious linguistic strengths and weakness, cultural, educational background and their individual differences in all factors that affect the teaching and learning process*. As David Sani Mwanza (2017) states that "different learners learn differently and have different preferences on what factors and methods promote effective learning, the teacher should consider learner characteristics before choosing the method/s of teaching" (p. 56).

1.5.1 Problems and Recommendation

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- To identify students' strengths and weakness conduct icebreaker activities, memory games (vocabulary), entry level test (LSRW), collect the profile of the students and learn their educational, cultural and economical background.
- Maintaining discipline in the class is a big task. For managing the class and discipline issues, other researchers said, establish classroom rules, learn students names and organize seating plans, create a friendly classroom atmosphere, use student leaders (Coleman 1989; Ur 1996; Watson Todd 2006; Trang, N.M., 2015, pp. 80,81).
- Other than this, in the language class, error correction is a tedious job. All 44 teachers said, they have problem in the correcting the mistakes of students. As Karshen (1972) explains "... second language acquisition theory implies that when the goal is learning, errors should indeed be corrected" (p. 117). To minimize this issue implement these in your classes; a. Encourage peer correction with the help of the advance level students and cross check now and then. b. Correct common and repeated errors done by the students at the end of every activity, while distributing the exam papers and after every conversation or language activities. c. Appreciate and recognize when the students does well after the correction.
- Evaluating and follow up. It is a hectic, due to the large number of students. *Most of the academic evaluation is in written and other language skills are not evaluated well. We teachers do the same thing to test students understanding. Evaluating other skills demand a lot of time.* To to avoid this issue the teachers can follow this; a. Don't wait for the Common exam timetable to conduct test. Testing should be part of learning. Test all the language skills as and when time permits.
- The interest of the students and teachers falls down in the heterogeneous classes, when the students find it difficult to cope with the language activity in the class they slip away from that activity and sit idle. (Especially the below average students, sometimes the advance level students especially when the task is too easy for them) As Weidenmann (2001) states that effective language teacher spends a lot of time in gathering interesting and attractive teaching and learning materials to liven up their teaching and the never spare a thought to do so. Hence, start the language activities with the easy level by encaging the slow learners and then proceed with the average and the advance level students. Make them feel they are treated according to their capacity.
- Giving attention to individual differences is impossible in the heterogeneous class. To solve this issue teacher has to spend some time initially to learn the strength and weakness of the learners. Without knowing, the problem of a student a teacher cannot give solution. So know your students strengths and weakness in learning.
- Following a homogeneous textbook to solve all the heterogeneous problems is a biggest challenge. Weidemann (2001) asserts that in eclectic approach, the teacher will use any teaching material which will be deemed fit for use in the class. They can be charts, textbooks, magazines, newspapers, radio, film, music, maps, pictures and computers. Understand textbook is not the canon to be followed but it is a guiding tool to achieve a common goal.
- Language bias is yet another problem that unconsciously creeps in to the language classroom since the majority of the students and the teacher who come from the same L1. As the solution the teachers have to; a. Take at most care not to alienate the minority non Tamil students. Try to keep away from your mother tongue influence. Stick on to your target language; make use of simple words to explain the lesson.
- On the other hand, Attitude towards learning a foreign language varies from student to student. Do not confine your teaching to classroom, test, evaluation, homework and

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results but break open the traditional teaching that confines to classroom and make it happen as it happens unintentionally in their daily life. Eclectic method too connects the everyday life to the learning.

- In the large class the previous linguistic knowledge of the students are overlooked. Teachers should come out of that fear cell which forces them just to complete syllabus on time. Instead, a teacher should look in to the strengths and weakness of all the students. Learning English is not a new phenomenon to this undergraduate level. Hence understanding their level will save many resources.
- Yet another problem is, providing the technological support to all the students is a challenge. The teachers should learn to teach the large classes with the limited facilities available in the classroom. Plan your lessons well to provide opportunity to all the learners if the technological facilities are less.
- Students who flock together with their cultural and social background sometimes they do sit together and limit their relationship with the other students. Motivate the students that they are here for learning language. Do not confine your learning to only classroom. Connect all the learning to the real life as eclectic method or activities do.
- Due to the large classroom strength, most of the language teachers follow lecture method. But, eclectic method, calls the teachers to be the facilitators, since it is a learner centred approach it gives importance to both input and practice stages. Language learning cannot be a one-way channel but it should be a reciprocal channel where both teacher and the learners feel happy.

Even though there is a pre-existed notion of negativity among the teachers about the heterogeneous classes, there are few positive advantages, which were spelt out by the teachers in the interview. They are: 1. The heterogeneous environment in the class challenges his/her teaching abilities and hence forces them to prepare a lot for ever class. 2. With the mixed intellectual and gender variations on a few cases, a healthy competition comes among students. 3. In the heterogeneous class, with the help of the intelligent student, the teacher is able to monitor the group activities, via which the peer learning takes place. 4. There is an opportunity for more creative and innovative ideas. 5. In the heterogeneous classrooms the availability of varied human resources are plenty. These five points of advantages of heterogeneous classroom itself added credit to the teachers to work happily with the learners and to produce greater performance of the language learners.

1.6 Conclusion

As for my experience there are no ideal class size – a teacher should share a common perception of small and large class. Since, in the real situation there is no common head count for a small or a large class said by a teacher. Whatsoever the head count in the class does not really matter; ultimately, what matters is that how you as a language teacher view the large heterogeneous class in its own specific situation and manage, matters a lot. The eclectic approach, demands a teacher to fully understand the real characteristics of each student and choose the best method that will suit their conditions. Eclectic approach is an approach that which throws away the idea of confining the teaching and learning to the school/college campus. The main idea of advocating the eclectic approach in to teaching language is to connect life experiences to the ideas presented in it. The type of activities that teachers choose should directly relate to the experience of the outside world. This helps the learners to eradicate the fear of classroom learning to the home learning environment. Eclectic approach does not view the skills of the language separately it views language as whole. Hence teaching the four skills becomes much easier to the teachers with in the given

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syllabus. Eclectic approach is a learner centred approach in input stage and in productive stages of learning; the teachers are just the facilitators of the learning. Teachers believe that the eclectic approach blends the traditional and novel methods with the aim of developing communicative competence in learners. The eclectic approach provides solution to teaching problems of language classroom because it permits the teachers to select what works best within their own dynamic contexts. Finally, the advantages of the heterogeneous classes itself a good solution provided by the teachers for advocating this approach to teach the heterogeneous group of learners.

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