Inspecting Mixed-Ability Group Challenges within Iranian EFL Public High Schools: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract
The nature of heterogeneity issues within the context of Iranian, English language learning contexts in high schools is one of the under-researched lines of inquiry. For this aim, a researcher-made, Likert-type questionnaire whose items were initially validated through a multi-stage, exploratory research design among 30 teachers was distributed among some 67, Iranian EFL teachers with different degrees of experience (less vs. more) to find the teachers' concerns/challenges and their strategies to tackle them. The findings suggested that the concerns behind heterogeneous classes were not consistent regrading weak and strong students. In the second place, it became evident that the order of tendency towards adopting the four enunciated strategies was not the same in the two less and more experienced teachers. Possible interpretations regarding teacher outlook as mapped on 'teacher experience' to target heterogeneity issues were presented in the end.

Keywords: Challenges, classroom management, heterogeneous classrooms, teacher strategies

Introduction

At present, students' diversity in nearly all educational settings is a norm rather than an exception (Bolli, Renold, & Worter, 2018; Fruth, & Avila-John, 2015; Lampareloo & Swann, 2016). Likewise, and in line with the mottoes of Socio-Cultural epoch within English Language Teaching (ELT) arenas (Myles, 2014; Panofski, 2012; Pathan, Memon, Memon, Khoso, & Bux, 2018, Thorne, & Lantolf, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978, etc.), the students populating a typical class might be considered as diverse due to miscellaneous factors on psychological, economical as well as educational grounds. Some scholars embracing diversity believe that, in fact, there is no such a thing as a 'homogeneous' class, as no two learners are really similar on all grounds including not just linguistic but beyond linguistic factors due to psychological, social, and economic assets pertained to each individual student (Hernandez, 2012; Harris, 2012; Woodward, 2005).

Nonetheless, such diversity leading to linguistic miscellany in language learning contexts might be challenging on the probable workload on teachers. The issue of teacher workload is likely to be exacerbated in the multi-level class based on recent research (Ashton, 2018; Mahmoodi-Shahrebabaki, 2017; Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017). The challenge to give all learners equal opportunity to learn and succeed is just one among other concerns (Treko, 2013). Increased dissatisfaction with traditional measures of academic success such as standardized achievement tests is another issue which make some teachers do their best to prepare learners for unique purposes for which there might not be a compromise view among learners due to their

diverse abilities (Stanovich, Jordan & Perot, 1998). In the assessment of pupils' progress and in evaluating the effectiveness of educational practices, some important domains of social competence, for instance, can often be ignored. Misaligned with Socio-Cultural trends, then desirable goals such as social integration, positive self-concept and personal development may totally be missing in English language classes (Center, Ward & Ferguson, 1991; Sale & Carey, 1995; Vaughn, Elbaum & Schumm, 1996; Villa & Thousand, 1995). In any case, in the multi-level classroom, the task is more complex as teachers additionally need to satisfactorily prepare students for the curriculum and assessment requirements at every level. Still other hurdles for an English language teacher can be how to mitigate the effects of high achievers vs. lower achievers as some higher status students might have higher rates of personal involvement and affect and this might prevent other students with lower linguistic abilities to improve on all accounts including positive self-concepts and social integration. Accordingly, this might lead to language anxiety issues (Horwitz, Horwitz, & cope, 1986).

On the one hand, few teachers have enough time, energy, or support for making substantial changes in their way of teaching when placed in heterogeneous contexts (George, 2005), on the other hand, if such attempts fail by English language teachers, teacher disappointment might be seen by students which can prompt further student retention issues, a worry resounded by Badenhorst and East (2015) in a context in New Zealand, Australia. For beginning teachers, the challenges in managing diverse classrooms are said to be especially huge as they are yet setting up themselves in the classroom and their teaching practice (De Neve & Devos, 2017; Suprayogi et al., 2017). This is a reason for concern given the high attrition rates among beginning teachers (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011). This can also be a prominent professional dilemma in such cases. Hence, doing a satisfactory job of differentiating instruction needs more attention on the part of researchers. It seems that research studies have paid lip service to this aspect of students' whole-functioning development in English Language learning (ELL) contexts (Sheppard, Manalo, & Henning, 2018).

Within Iranian ELL contexts in formal educational contexts such as high schools and universities, concern over heterogeneous classes as such esp. regarding language abilities has been a long lasting distress among English language teachers. In public high schools, students are grouped in the same class according to the year of study and to their age only. Therefore, classrooms include students with varying proficiency levels and needs. Most classes are relatively large and consist of about thirty to thirty-five students. English teachers have long been confronted with some challenges in managing students as the classes are assorted with a variety of capacities. This imbalance as in other English as a Foreign language (EFL) contexts is due to the students' access to language schools outside the formal educational contexts. In such a context, the task of English teacher has hitherto been very challenging.

Informed by the above-cited challenges, the authors in this study intended to screen the impact of homogeneity on some Iranian English language teachers with varied teaching experiences, to detect the associated issues involved in heterogeneous classes within public high schools and to see through teachers' views over tackling these issues.

Background of the Study

Heterogeneity Hitches in Language Classes

In the existing literature, some of the problems of an English teacher in heterogeneous classes have long been perceived through correlational designs on some prominent issues such as learners' different learning styles (Ellis, 1997; Faleiros, 2009; George, 2005; Prema, 2016; Reid, 1995), personality traits (Zhou, 2015), learning strategies (Chamot, 2016; Fuchs, 2017),

intelligence (Zineb, 2013), language aptitudes (Lightbown & Spada, 2002), interest (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2005; Simanova, 2010), motivation (Chairat, 2015), Self-discipline (Rahimi, & Asadollahi, 2012; Valentic, 2005), background knowledge (Gordon, 2010; Perera, 2010; Tsao, 2003) among others.

In mixed-grouping classes, comprehension levels in dialogues and language problems of students have always been deemed as different due to some learners having access to outside informal ELL contexts (Tsao, 2003). Such classes comprise dissimilar 'listeners',' readers', 'writers' and 'speakers' as well as learners with 'attention' and 'thinking' problems (Perera, 2010). This dilemma might, in effect, lead teachers and even curriculum designers to design activities suitable for average levels. Within such a situation, both low and high achievers might get entangled either in keeping up with the class speed and integrity or adjusting with the class norms due to their in/capability status among both groups. This situation might distort class cohesion for a language teacher on managerial matters. What is fascinating and challenging for one student may be exhausting or too simple for another. So while the teacher's consideration is settled on one student on one side of the class, the others lose focus and switch off and get progressively boisterous. This circumstance can be valid for numerous heterogeneous classes (Prodromau, 1994).

There were still varied lines of research on the heterogeneity issues in the literature undertaken through experimental research designs which referred to both positive and negative aspects of heterogeneity for language classes. In the following section, some empirical studies on the possible influence of mixed-ability classes were reviewed in order to find other whys and whereabouts of this topic.

Empirical Studies on EFL Strategies for Tackling Heterogeneity Issues

Surveying the literature pointed to the fact that many different researchers had dealt with how teachers could deal with mixed ability classes including Bremner (2008), Cohen (1991), Perera (2010), Na (2007), Pool (2008), Slavin (1995) Simanova (2010), Tomlinson (2012, 2014) etc.

Having distinguished mixed-ability classes with mixed ability teaching, Brember (2008) asserted that not all teachers can manage such classes. He insisted on promoting thinking and learning skills, being resourceful and organized, and promoting cooperative group work among learners instead of giving mere content to them on some aspects of vocabulary items, for example.

Perera (2010), in an attempt on criticizing current instructional plans, asserted that in heterogeneous classes, the teacher's book does not support teachers in differentiating the materials in order to cope with heterogeneous classes. Dealing with the classes 'teaching the average', leaving slow learners struggling and failing to involve advanced students at the same time is very common for most teachers.

Poole (2008) directed a study of fifth-grade students put in two mixed-ability groups in which students alternated doing read aloud and talking about the content. This study found that low-ability students endured from lowered academic achievement as a result of being in a mixed-ability reading group. The three low-ability students that were examined amid the group meetings were found to have read less than the other students. The teacher's tendency was to give them fewer sections to read than their group members. These three students being contemplated were moreover hindered by the teacher substantially more than their companions. Interrupting the low-ability students was the teacher's response to battling readers rather than having them sound the words out. Poole (2008) reasoned that these three students did not reach the academic

achievement they would have if they had been put in groups with students of a similar reading level and had been given an equivalent chance to read and gain from the read aloud. Poole (2008) acknowledged these outcomes may not be relevant to all disciplines, but this kind of interaction is something to watch for in heterogeneous ability groups.

Managing Heterogeneous Classes

Various tactics have long been implemented by EFL teachers to resolve the issues of mixed-ability grouping. Among some, one may refer to giving separated classroom instruction i.e., the adjustment of classroom techniques to students' distinctive learning premiums and needs so that all students encounter challenge, achievement, and fulfillment Tomlinson (2013), Streaming or ability grouping (Mansor, Prethaban Maniam, Hunt, & Mohd Nor, 2016; Sixteen, 1984), instructional adjustments (Ur, 2005) etc.

In some studies, teachers had undertaken grouping both as a useful and detrimental approach. (Mansor, et al, 2016; Sheppard, et al, 2018). Among some elementary students in Malaysian schools, Mansor et al (2016) investigated streaming or the same whole year grouping as a strategy for accommodating students with similar abilities based on the results of their English achievement scores in the previous year. Ability grouping had been established during the whole year's instructions. Teachers' perceptions regarding benefits of streaming were aligned with some positive settlements of student performances within standardized lesson planning, which this had also reduced peer pressure to the teachers' views and had smoothed the way for homogeneous students to improve and increase their motivation as well; however, this had been considered as disadvantageous for elevating inter-ability socialization of students, lowering self-esteem to the detriment of those involved in uniform exams. In another attempt, Sheppard et al (2018) explored ability grouping in a Taiwanese English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. In the end, results were clue for the beneficiary effects of this strategy only among low ability students.

Ur (2005) proposed an assortment of strategies teachers could receive to defeat the issues which arise in heterogeneous classes such as managing discipline problems, via distributing fluctuating tasks and materials which make the lesson all the more fascinating. For powerful students, teachers might individualize exercises, in this way students learn at their own pace and infrequently they pick their own particular tasks. Teachers could energize compulsory plus optional instructions in which students needed to complete a minimal part of the task and the rest they would go with the off chance that they liked to, have time or wish to do; teachers could likewise encourage open-ended cues, in which students didn't have foreordained right answers.

In order to discover appropriate materials, teachers need to adjust and additionally supplement course books to include variety, to incorporate components of decision and individualization and to get more participation which are essential qualities in heterogeneous classes. To take after students, teachers should work with personalization and individualization or checking pairs and groups by listening to them and giving feedback later on. To initiate support, teachers ought to draw in students in the tasks by expanding collective and individual work utilizing open-ended cues.

In this research, which is part of a larger research study, the researchers were to initially explore English language teacher's conceptions of heterogeneous classes with regard to the possible hindrance in the context of Iranian high schools and link the issues to teachers' experiences (low vs. high) concerning their perceived strategies for confronting with the heterogeneity issues. Deep involvement in the existing literature on this topic helped the researchers in this study to prepare a list of well-suited, informed questions to be sought within

diverse English language teachers. For brevity reasons, other aspects of heterogeneity are thus excluded at this point. To reiterate, the suggested research questions in this study were:

Q1.What issues are involved in English language learning among weak and strong students in the contexts of Iranian EFL according to high school English language teachers' views?
Q2.What strategies do EFL Iranian Teachers with different degrees of teaching experience (Less vs. More) suggest to tackle the educational challenges in heterogeneous classes?

Methodology

The present study was concerned with investigating English language teachers' attitudes towards heterogeneity within Iranian high schools in order to construct a validated scale for measuring the issues involved in heterogeneous classes. Because the researchers were interested in deeply delving into teachers' attitudes/views, it was obvious that the best strategy for collecting information could only be attained through multistage exploratory designs. Consequently, this study utilized a qualitative research design which took advantage of a choice of techniques, including a sequential exploratory research design (Creswell, 2009), covering an initial needs analysis through semi-structured interviews with experts, and an open-ended questionnaire, which gave rise to a researcher-made questionnaire. The constructed questionnaire was piloted among some sixty-seven Iranian EFL teachers across the country. This last stage was to validate the heterogeneity issues involved in the context of Iranian MoE. for which the authors originally intended to assess a critical issue pertained to Applied Linguistics arenas through a sequential exploratory design rather than fully numerical measures catering for factor analysis techniques and the like (Hashemi & Babaie, 2013).

Participants and Research Context

Initially, a preliminary assessment over possible concerns and apprehensions was undertaken among some six highly experienced EFL teachers- as expert knowers- to find wide-ranging research schemes on some related components to the issues of heterogeneity. All of these six teachers (both male, no=1 and female, no=5) had more than twenty years' experience (Table 1). Due to their high experiences and high stock of pedagogical knowledge, these groups of teachers were selected through purposive sampling.

Table 1. *Demographic Information of the Participants During Initial Stage: Autobiographical Narratives*

Interviewee	Gender	Experience (years)	Age
T_A	Female	24	46
T_B	Female	26	48
T_C	Female	23	45
T_D	Female	27	49
T_E	Female	25	47
T_F	Male	28	50

Then through clustered sampling techniques, a total number of twenty-four English language teachers (Male and Female) were selected from different local public high schools in Iranian Ministry of Education (MoE) within Khorasan Razavi province (diverse districts) who

volunteered to cooperate in responding to a written open-ended questionnaire. The participants at this stage of data collection were from two diverse sets of teaching experiences (Low vs. High) from among affiliated, full time, English language teachers in Iranian MoE. The third group of participants in this study (no. 67) were randomly selected through a larger population of Iranian community of EFL teachers across the country again among both male and female teachers with an age range of 23-50 and with diverse teaching experiences (Low vs. High). Tables 2 and 3 below summarize the participants at the last two stages of data collection.

Table 2. *Demographic information of the participants in the first phase (Open-ended questionnaire)*

Gender	**Percent**	**Experience (years)**	**Percent**
Male	**37.5%**	1-5	**8.33%**
Female	**62.5%**	**6-10**	**8.33%**
		11-15	**12.5%**
		+16	**70.83%**

Since a representative investigation of teaching attitudes was also intended to be screened through a constructed Likert-type questionnaire, volunteering teachers in the third stage were divided into two groups with Low (1-15) and High (16-30) teaching experiences. Regarding experience, there is not any united definition of the novice vs. experienced teachers. The researchers define it consistent with their own understandings (Hai-xia, & Li-jun, 2010). In this study, experienced teachers were defined to have at least fifteen years' experience in teaching and the less experienced teachers were those who had less than fifteen years' experience in teaching.

Data Collection Procedures

In the first stage, after conducting an in-depth study in the existing literature and interview sessions with six English language teachers, some key ideas were upheld, which focused on some relevant issues and concerns on heterogeneous classes including students' motivation, their performance in mixed-ability groups, students' participation in interactive activities, their reaction to book contents, and teachers' managerial skills in such contexts. Here, through a conscious attempt via ethnography of communication in the first author's teaching context, it was tried to assemble some pertinent data through getting valid information from other English language highly experienced teachers via some semi-structured interviews about their core experiences and challenges as well as their personal experiences in Iranian MoE. The interviews lasted approximately twenty minutes. They were audio-recorded for accuracy of transcriptions and then went through content analysis. On trustworthiness issues, it is worth mentioning that this initial questionnaire was amended through member checking by two TEFL experts having PhD degrees and reduced to five questions which tapped students' performance (two items), teachers' performance (two items), and causes of heterogeneity. A final question was also added to this questionnaire that required respondents to write their memories as in diary studies (Pavlencko, 2007) regarding any conspicuous event that had occurred to them which could remind us of any further issues with heterogeneity concerns through teachers' autobiographical narratives. However, few teachers (only two out of the twenty-four teachers) had scripted their memories in this regard.

In the next phase, in line with the aims of the present study, based on the views corroborated by the participants in the first two stages, a Likert-type questionnaire with five

scales involving (1) Mostly agree, (2) Agree, (3) Neutral, (4) Disagree, and (5) Mostly disagree was constructed having twenty-four items which tapped teachers' attitudes over some insights relevant to heterogeneity issues. Items of this second questionnaire were prepared after an in-depth content analysis of the ideas mentioned by the English language teachers in the previous stage through analyzing the concepts from the open-ended questionnaire and the interview sessions with six highly experienced teachers. It had three parts on the main components of the effect of heterogeneity on teacher- student performance, and causes of heterogeneity. Items were linked on some positive attitudes toward heterogeneity (item no, 1,2, 18), as well as some negative attitudes (item no. 3,4, 5,6,7,10,14, 19, 21,23,24) and the utilized strategies that had been reported by the teachers in the previous stage including item no, 8,9,11,12,13, 14, 16, 20, 22 & 24. This questionnaire was constructed via Google Forms and it was accessible through social networking sites as well as sending by emails to those who announced their consent.

Results

To reiterate, in the first two phases of the data collection, data were gathered through interview sessions and an open-ended questionnaire. The intention was to extract whatever hidden insights that might be related to the issues of heterogeneity from colleagues' views so that relevant insights/challenges be incorporated into the larger scale questionnaire for the succeeding stage.

Phase One: Inspiration of EFL Teacher's Overall Views as to Heterogeneity Concerns

In line with the first research question concerning the English league learning issues by weak and strong students through being present in the same class, pertained Iranian EFL high school teachers' views were collected regarding homogenous/ heterogeneous classes. Teachers corroborated their views over hypothetical effect of heterogeneity in their classes on some factors such as students' and teachers' performance some among other factors including causes of heterogeneity.

Table 3(appendix) summarizes the codes and categories as classified from the first two data collection stages during the open and axial coding steps for the ideas from interview sessions with teachers and the open-ended questionnaire.

Influence on Students' Performance

Two questions in the open-ended questionnaire (Items 1 & 4) inquired teachers to give their views as to the students' improved/hindered learning which might occur in heterogeneous vs. homogenous classes.

Item no.1: Does heterogeneity of your classroom influence students' performance?

Regarding item no.1, nearly all teachers (22, 95%) stated that heterogeneity of their classroom influenced their students' performance. This initial question ensured us only to gain an overall preview of their positive vs. negative perspectives over the heterogeneity issues to see through if this could affect students' views.

Some teachers believed that regarding the influence of heterogeneity on students' performance, this all depended on teachers' utilized method and his/her philosophical stance in teaching. about 8.33% of the teachers believed that both classes could be useful if the teacher used different methods and means according to the needs of students.

Example:

T 1: *The amount of influence depends on the way the teacher teaches and the view of the teacher on student and learning.*

Some of them believed that on psychological reasons, this had a negative influence on stronger students:

Example:

T 3: *Stronger students learn early and, if repeated, get tired, and for the weaker, they should be taught to each line of the book.*

T 18: *Class heterogeneity based on my personal experience usually has a negative impact on stronger students, and it causes them insecurity and indisposition, but poorer students will progress if they have sufficient motivation and be in groups that include stronger ones. Some of the weak students who are interested in cooperative learning can benefit from this grouping and the lessons will be reviewed for them and experience a pleasurable situation.*

this point was also endorsed by some more experienced teachers like teacher five below. However, she believed that the negative effect on stronger students can only be compared with weaker ones in the same class.

T 5: *Heterogeneity leads to despair and frustration in the weaker students.*

Among colleagues in the more experienced strand, some teachers referred to this as an opportunity for learning on the part of stronger students, though they did not refer to any positive or negative feelings that strong students might have for their own improvement in such classes. Teacher fifteen -a female more experienced teacher- was a case in point:

T 15: *I introduce strong students as a model of hard work in the class, and I note that you can also reach this stage by trying. It will motivate students to study more. In other words, stronger students act as the exciter of others.*

Meanwhile, among more experienced teachers, there were those who referred to both negative and positive aspects regarding the influence of heterogeneity on students' performance (T 23).

Example:

T 23: *This has both positive and negative impacts:*

Positive Impact: *Students learn from each other. Good Students help poorly trained students. More competition in the classroom exists. The stronger students help in the formation of the group to the teacher because they are all good leaders in every group.*

Negative Impact: *Sometimes it disappoints and despairs weak students. Strong students feel a sense of pride so that they don't feel a need to study and work hard anymore. Sometimes the low-level students cause disappointment and a/motivation among good students. It also takes time for the class because you must explain and explain each part for students to be sure all have understood the lesson.*

Item four in the open-ended questionnaire was constructed to see in what ways there was any effect of heterogeneity on students' learning. Among the responses, (21, 87.5%) stated that students could learn more in homogeneous classes.

Item no.4: In your view, do students learn more in homogeneous or heterogeneous classes?

Item four in the distributed questionnaire required teachers to indicate how and in what ways students' achievements could be influenced by heterogeneity issues. Twenty teachers (83.3%) thought that students could learn more in homogeneous classes.

Some teachers mentioned that assorted student learning in the teaching materials as provided by MoE had caused worries for heterogeneous classes:

Examples:

T4*: The same textbook for all and students with different levels will force the teacher to hold compensatory classes.*

T14: *Teaching materials may not be at the level of weaker students and cause fatigue, especially most of these students do not ask any questions about eliminating learning bugs.*

Since most language textbooks are intended for a perfect homogeneous classroom condition, teachers dependably need to manage the issue that students respond to the textbook distinctively because of their individual contrasts. Some students may locate the textbook exhausting and hard, though some think that it's intriguing or simple. In addition, as language teaching course materials are currently based on content-based or topic-based syllabi, some students may discover the topics dull, strange, or futile; though some others might think that they are agreeable, commonplace or fascinating.

Teachers 20 and 21 below had issued some responses, which showed teachers' tendency not to be in heterogamous classes since students' motivation was deteriorated:

Example:

T20: *Stronger students become bored and busy then their attention to the teacher and class decreases then they will have less participation. The weaker ones are embarrassed and don't ask any questions and get stuck in the corner and secluded.*

T 21: *Good Students become passive and degraded under the influence of the weaker.*

Influence on Teachers' Performance

Regarding the influence of heterogeneity on teacher's performance, items two and five were proposed to tap this issue.

Item no. 2: Does heterogeneity of your classroom affect your own performance as a teacher? How?

In all, twenty-one teachers out of twenty-four teachers (87.5%) stated heterogeneity of classroom had affected their performance in many respects. This was current among both less and more experienced teachers. Below, some case examples have been brought among both groups.

Among less experienced teachers, the main concern mentioned by the teachers was that they must have made sure that the lesson is learnt by everyone present in class. This could show among other things teacher commitment with novice teachers via their concern for the weaker students. Teachers three and sixteen below are just some examples.

T 3*: Because of conscientiousness, we have to repeat lessons in order that at least 60% of the students learn and maximized learning happens.*

T 16: *Most of the class time is for reviewing and repeating the previous lessons over and over again.*

Some teachers (10 & 17) among more experienced teachers referred to their own disinclination and disinterest in teaching which might be caused in such a situation.

T10: *The teacher's efforts are sometimes ineffective and his/her interest is reduced.*

T17*: The teacher becomes fatigued and his/her energy dissipates.*

Among the teachers, some cited this inefficacy could be related to the medium of instruction that caused despair among weak students: Teacher thirteen was a case in point:

T13: *It influences the teachings of language to be in Persian or English. For weak students, it is not recommended to speak English.*

Teacher fourteen referred to the difficulties in designing proper materials for teaching in such classes:

T14: *We get confused that according to which group we should prepare and present the material.*

Teachers 18 and 23 had also endorsed this statement by teacher fourteen:

T 18: *The teacher's performance is definitely influenced by the fact that more thought and effort is needed to coordinate and gauge the activities and the progress of learning, and students must be cleverly grouped in order to strengthen the poorer from the stronger students' abilities.*

T 23: *I make the level of teaching and behavior fit in with all kinds of students with different cultures, knowledge, and ..... of course it is a very difficult and hard task.*

Item no. 5: Do you utilize distinctive styles of teaching in heterogeneous classes?

The fifth question in the open-ended questionnaire was concerned with the different teaching styles that teachers had taken in heterogeneous classes. This question was proposed to indirectly inspect teachers' strategies in catering for mixed-ability classes. 91.66% (22 out of 24) of the respondents believed that they had used distinctive styles in their classes. Below, some of the teachers' responses have been presented in random, that show their attempts in this regard.

T18: *As language teachers, we need to discover creative approaches to encourage our students and get them engaged in their task. It has been a challenging experience for the teachers of English language to handle the issues in the non-homogeneous classrooms. It is the duty of language teachers to scan out a few answers for the issues and help the students to achieve their objective.*

T6: *Formation of collaborative and participatory groups that empower the poor to be taught by the stronger.*

Phase two: Strategies used by Less and More EFL Teachers to Tackle Heterogeneity

In the second phase of this study and in line with responding to the second research question, another group of teachers including some sixty-seven EFL teachers contributed of their time with responding to another researcher-made survey which tapped their attitudes regarding the heterogeneity disputes as corroborated in the previous stage. This second questionnaire was to further validate the issues debated by the two groups of less and more experienced teachers. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this research, only the results of frequency counts/rates for ten questions including item no. 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 20, 22, & 24 are brought below which display variability of less vs. more experienced teachers as to adopting diverse strategies for tackling the issues in mixed-ability classes.

Four themes had emerged in the previous stage regarding teachers' strategies for resolving the issues of heterogeneity in Iranian contexts, which were incorporated into the survey including 1) Seeking help from stronger students (item no.13), 2) Helping weak students individually (item no. 9, 12, 20, 22, & 24), 3) Instructional adjustment by language teachers (item no, 8, 11, 14), and finally 4) Seeking help from colleagues (item no. 16). For an ease of interpretation, scales of the questionnaire were merged into a trichotomous scale verifying positive (strongly agree and agree) coded as 2, negative (strongly disagree and disagree) coded as 1 and neutral responses coded as 0.

Response to the Second Research Questions: Teacher Strategies

In line with the second research question in this study, among the four strategies as the results verified, just in instructional adjustment strategy, the two (Less vs. More) teachers could

be significantly differentiated. Table 4 displays the order of teachers' self-reported based on the estimated Mean Ranks in line with their positive responses i.e., higher MR indicated higher preference for each strategy.

Table 4. *Mean Rank of strategy adoption in Less vs. More experienced groups*

Less Experienced	**More Experienced**
Helping weak students individually MR = 36. 45	Instructional adjustment MR = 40
Seeking help from colleagues MR= 33.51	Seeking help from stronger students MR= 36.35
Seeking help from stronger students MR= 32.41	Seeking help from colleagues MR= 33.48
Instructional adjustment MR = 29	Helping weak students individually MR = 28. 96

As seen in table 4, in the two groups, the order of tendency towards adopting each individual strategy was not the same in the two groups. It was interesting to note that regarding instructional adjustment, less experienced group of teachers had the least tendency while for the more experienced teachers, adapting instructional plans had top priority. This showed among other things that the more experienced teachers were, changing/adjusting as relied on their own resources/capitals in the same class became more prominent. Another conspicuous outcome of table 4 was vis-à-vis helping weak students among less experienced teachers, which had been rated higher compared with other strategies in the same group of teachers but this strategy had the least rated status among the more experienced teachers. This could also show, among other things, that possibly because more experienced group had conceivably less energy and vigor compared with less experienced teachers, due to the workload pressure, this had deterred them to embark on giving individual help to weaker students and instead they had tended to adjust their teaching to whole class instruction. On the other hand, this could also indirectly confirm teacher-centeredness condition among more experienced teachers, though further research must verify if this condition is stable in other contexts among EFL teachers or not.

Discussion

In the current research, which was extracted from a larger study, the researcher inspected the idea of heterogeneity issues inside Iranian MoE among a total number of ninety-seven EFL teachers who contributed of their time during three fundamental stages. In the first stage, an exploration over possible concerns and apprehensions was undertaken among some six highly experienced EFL teachers- as expert knowers- and some schemes on three components were thought as relevant to the research aims comprising 1) influence of heterogeneity on students' performance, 2) influence of heterogeneity on teachers' performance, and 3) Causes of heterogeneity. These three components were added to an open-ended questionnaire having five

questions plus a last section on teachers' lived experienced through memory scrutiny as in diary studies. The first cohort of teachers (n. 24) responded to the questionnaire. Content analyses of the mentioned propositions by the first teachers were validated through another questionnaire with a Likert scale, which was distributed among a second cohort comprising a group of less vs. more experienced teachers in a larger context of Iranian MoE (no.67). This second stage of data collection was to further analyze the distribution of teachers' attitudes/outlooks over the emerged components in the first stage through a sequential exploratory research design, which should be characteristic of research designs in Applied Linguistics arenas involving insights, which could hardly be extracted through quantifiable measures only.

Altogether, the researchers in this research found ground for the significance of introducing ability grouping in English language courses within the context of Iranian high school students. Some scholars in other EFL contexts such as Hong Kong had already alleged that within public high schools, the weighed beneficial effects of ability grouping were more than its detrimental influence (Cheung, & Rudowicz, 2010). In the current research, teachers' attitudes were clue for the energy and effort that they had to excerpt for such classes due to diverse concerns that they communicated at different stages. In the most part, this confirmed that although they were ready to meet the specific adapting needs of each student, teachers alleged that they had to make their best to resolve the issues when being in such contexts. Other findings in similar research also showed that in heterogeneous classes teachers could finally alter the strategy, materials, and pace of instruction to something which was more suitable for the advancement of the students' language skills, although it took time and energy for the teachers (Kim, 2012). Kim found that the act of ability grouping would possibly prompt more work for teachers, as they were required to alter materials for various levels. Likewise, numerous teachers demonstrated that they avoided being assigned to lower level classes because of the pressure involved because grouping poorer students together regularly bring about classroom management and discipline difficulties.

In recent era, ability grouping is supported by numerous arguments and currently exercised in many EFL contexts such as Taiwan, Japan and Malaysia (Sheppard et al, 2018). For students, there is less stress and pressure since they are just required to work at their own level, which may prompt a lessening in the reduction in foreign language learning tension (Luo & Tsai, 2002) which was accepted to be facilitative of language learning (Horwitz, et al, 1986). Ability grouping can likewise prompt enhanced motivation. Baker (1998, 2006) contemplated that giving learning conditions and supporting frameworks that are helpful for fruitful learning activities can encourage students' motivation.

It is clear that EFL teachers in Iran confront diverse challenges in teaching heterogeneous classes. This result is predictable with numerous studies that have demonstrated the challenges confronting teachers in heterogeneous classes. In these classes, teachers are looked with challenges in tending to the requirements of students according to their differences. When teachers endeavor to design a lesson that fits the distinctive levels, they think that it is troublesome (Hernandez, 2012). In addition, Xanthou and Pavlou (2010) found in their investigation directed in Cyprus that teachers confront numerous difficulties and the syllabus does not suit every one of the students with their distinctive levels and capacities. This issue had prompted aggravated disciplines in the classroom and dissatisfaction among the students.

Conclusion

Overall, in the current research with an exploratory approach in nature, diverse issues conceptualized as concerns/challenges by the more and less experienced teachers gave rise to

some mostly utilized strategies to address heterogeneity issues, which might be beneficial for other EFL teachers who are daily struggling with this problem inside the country. As the first step, the primary critical matter towards tackling the issues involved with heterogeneity is being aware of the challenges. As a second step, a mindful teacher has an obligation to guarantee that all students in a classroom participate with all their potentials in class. Hereby, since in line with the mottoes of the 21st century, it is upon the teacher to influence the essential adaptations and adjustments to be able to meet the various needs of the students in the mixed-ability class, it seems that it is recommended to a teacher to first acknowledge the realities of other classes like his/her classes and apply certain strategies to guarantee viable learning for all. In this case, embracing the results as gained in this research might be significant for those teachers that have similar concerns. The techniques that have been proposed by numerous specialists will assist teachers in minimizing the challenges they come across in a heterogeneous classroom.

Another critical matter here is getting assistance from students' views. It seems that involving students to address the issues pertained to heterogeneity is a missing gap within our ELT domains. Accordingly, students should become aware of effective techniques in order to enhance their levels and be dynamic. If their awareness is raised over the type of strategies that teachers use to manage their ability differences, they can feel more confident when teachers are supportive and enthusiastic over their problems. Teachers also need to discuss their experiences together in order to help their students through doing more reflective studies as such.

To conclude, two critical points are worth mentioning at this point. Firstly, in this research, issues on heterogeneous classes in the context of Iranian high schools were communicated through the eyes of EFL teachers. It seems that it might require more than wishful thinking or traditional staff development. It is desirable that such issues be also looked upon from other even more prominent stakeholders such as students so that initial steps toward these attempts be taken in near future aiming at providing apt instruction that benefit all students (Klein, 2015). Then and there, future studies can research diverse groups of stakeholders such as students' recognition/beliefs, about the challenges they have while learning English in mixed-ability classes. Furthermore, new books implemented in the educational system of Iran have all been designed in line with the linguistics variation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as an international standard for describing language ability. However, no criteria for grouping students into their appropriate levels have been hitherto considered by the system due to applicability reasons. It is then recommended that critical measures be taken by the proponents of Communicative Language Teaching policies to pave the way for proper English language education within Iranian high schools.

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Appendix

Table 3. *Incorporated codes and categories from the open-ended questionnaire*

1-The causes of heterogeneity	**Primary codes**	**Secondary codes**	**Case evidences**
	Student	talent/ intelligence	T 2: Family and social class level, talent and intelligence. T 23: Difference in talent and

		intelligence, the difference in parenting education, the different economic status of households, divorce, and economic issues, and students' household situations.
	Carelessness	T16: students ' inexactitude and careless toward learning not English even in other lessons is a matter that enraged me.
Family	Culture	T 1: In night schools (Nemooneh Dowlati) students from different villages with a different culture, talent and ability study with urban students.
	Social class	T 2: Family and social class level, talent and intelligence.
	Economic status	T 23: Difference in talent and intelligence, the difference in parenting education, the different economic status of households, divorce, and economic issues, and students' household situations.
	Rural or urban	T 1: In night schools (Nemooneh Dowlati) students from different villages with a different culture, talent and ability study with urban students.
Parents	Parental involvement	T 10: The lack of familiarity of parents in English makes them unable to be effective, and the lack of government support that English books have not changed for many years, and its low significance and the low effect on final examinations and koncor. (It is considered a general lesson) T19: some parents help their

				children in learning English
	Background knowledge	English private institutes		T 3: Some students attend school language classes of private institutes. T 12: Some students have not attended in English language institutes yet the new books are conversational-oriented, and they often have poor listening, speaking skills.
		Electronic instruments(Videos and satellite channels or other software)		T15: Some students have been trained in institutions and some have lived outside the country for years and some groups without any background knowledge have to sit in one class with each other.
		Private teachers and classes		
	Educational system(Academic Preparation)	T 9: the Incorrect educational system has made students who do not qualify to enter a higher level.		
2-Effect on students	Psychological Problems	Tired and despair and frustration	For good students	T 3: Stronger students learn early and, if repeated, they get tired, and for the weaker, they should be taught to each line of the book.
			For weak students	T 5: Heterogeneity leads to despair and frustration in the weaker students.
	More Competition	T23: Students learn from each other. Good students help poorly trained students. More competition in the classroom exists. The stronger students help in the formation of the group to the teacher because they are good leaders in every group.		
	Good students as Exciter	T 15: I introduce strong students as a model of hard		

	for others(model of hard work)	work in the class, and I note that you can also reach this stage by trying. It will motivate students to study more. In other words, stronger students act as the exciter of others.
	Disappointment	T23: Sometimes, it disappoints and despairs weak students. Strong students feel a sense of pride that feel not need to study and work hard anymore. Sometimes, the low-level students cause disappointment among good students. It also takes time for the class because you must explain and explain each part for students to be sure all have understood the lesson.
	Less confidence	T 19: Stronger students who have gone through English institutes mock the weaker ones, and this makes the weaker students less confident. They pretend to have learned the lessons and do not participate and ask questions but in quizzes, we get to know that they had not understood much.
3-Effect on teachers	Work load	T 3: Because of conscientiousness, we have to repeat lessons in order that at least 60% of the students learn and maximized learning happens. T 18: The teacher's performance is definitely influenced by the fact that more thought and effort is needed to coordinate and gauge the activities and the progress of learning, and students must be cleverly grouped in order to strengthen the poorer from the stronger students' abilities. T 23: I make the level of teaching and behavior fit in with all kinds of students with different cultures, knowledge, and ..... of course it is a very difficult and hard task.
	Difficulty in dealing with students' needs and advances	T 5: Information is introduced for medium level students; therefore, less content is provided for the class. I can't become more acquainted with and take after the advance of the considerable number of students in my class: there are excessively numerous cases like this and they're all so unique.
	Time management	T 7: Weaker students learn later and more time of the class is devoted to them to understand. I think all have got the new lessons because most feedback is taken from the stronger students when teaching..
	Psychological problem	T 10: The teacher's efforts are sometimes ineffective and his interest is reduced. T17: The teacher becomes tired and his energy dissipates.

	Classroom management	T 16: Most of the class time is for reviewing and repeating the previous lessons over and over again.
	Material preparation	T 13: It influences the teachings of language to be in Persian or English. For weak students, it is not recommended to speak English. T 14: We get confused that according to which group we should prepare and present the material.
4-Faced Challenges	Material /textbook level	T 14: Teaching material may not be at the level of weaker students and this causes fatigue among students, especially most of these students do not ask any questions about eliminating Learning Bugs. T16: I can't ensure they're all adapting successfully; the tasks I give are either excessively troublesome or too simple for a considerable number of my students. A lot of them… T20: I can't discover reasonable materials: the course is 'homogeneous' - unbendingly it goes for one sort of student, without any alternatives or adaptability.
	Participation	T16. I can't enact them all: exclusively a few students- the more capable and sure ones - appear to react effectively to my inquiries. T 17: The stronger students are more active and the weaker ones do not participate in class discussions, which this undermines their morale. T 20: Stronger students become bored then their attention to the teacher and class decreases then they will have less participation. The weaker ones are embarrassed and don't ask any questions and get stuck in the corner and secluded. T 21: Good Students become passive and degraded under the influence of the weaker.
	Interest	T5: They get exhausted: I can't discover points and exercises that keep them all intrigued.
	Management(Discipline)	T 2: Stronger students become tired soon and neglected by the teacher and create irregularities in the classroom. T 9: Stronger students learn early and pay less attention and create irregularities. T13: I have trained issues in these classes; I find them hard to control.

5-Strategies used by teachers	Help from good students	T19: I will take the first level test and make the stronger students as the leader of weaker to help them learn more quickly and give more time to new lessons in the classroom. T 18: The teacher's performance is definitely influenced by the fact that more thought and effort is needed to coordinate and gauge the activities and the progress of learning, and students must be cleverly grouped in order to strengthen the poorer from the stronger students' abilities.
	Adjusting instruction	T18: The teacher's performance is definitely influenced by the fact that more thought and effort is needed to coordinate and gauge the activities and the progress of learning, and students must be cleverly grouped in order to strengthen the poorer from the stronger students. T 23: …because different students have different styles and sometimes teaching to them requires a combination of different styles and eclectic ways.
	Helping weaker students individually	T 3: Stronger students learn quickly and, if repeated, they get tired, and for the weaker students, they should be taught to each line of the book.