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The Effect of Lack of Homogeneity Among Students Regarding Their Basic English knowledge on Their Accomplishment In Preliminary English Course At Universities

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Abstract: This study reports an experiment conducted to investigate the effect of homogeneity among students regarding their initial English knowledge on the achievement of the course materials in preliminary English course at university. The experiment involved two groups of students who were majoring not in English but in such fields as engineering, social sciences, and etc. at Abhar IAU (Islamic Azad University), Iran. The control group was taught the same previous materials for the time of experiment. The experimental group was divided to two groups with 30 students based on their scores on a test that showed their initial general English knowledge: The students who had scored about or below the mean were assigned as one group, and the other half who had scored about or over the mean as the other experimental group. Both of the experimental groups were taught the course materials which were designed slightly differently for each of the groups based on the students' initial English knowledge, in two different classes. At the end of teaching all groups took an achievement test. The comparison of the results of the achievement test showed that the experimental group did significantly better than the control group in achieving the course materials. The overall findings suggest that dividing the students taking Preliminary English Course, regarding their basic English knowledge, into 2 groups of students with higher level of general English knowledge, and the students with lower level of general English knowledge, and teaching especially developed course materials based on the students' initial general English knowledge has a positive effect on the students' achievement of the course materials.

Key words: Homogeneity, general English knowledge, achievement of the course materials.

INTRODUCTION

Lack or shortage of the homogeneity among students regarding their general English knowledge in foreign language learning classes has been an issue of interest and research for decades. It should be pointed that by having homogeneous students, in this study, it is meant that students have a similar or the same level of general English. In homogeneous groups, students are grouped according to their abilities, genders, races, So that every one in the group is around the same level of a criterion considered for grouping as ability level, gender, (Baer, 2003).

Over the past 90 years about 550 studies have been conducted over the effectiveness of cooperative and individualistic Learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1998). Some of the studies on this issue of language learning have come to this result that teaching the same materials to the students with different levels of language proficiency by the same teacher in the same class does not well guarantee students' successful learning, beside, in many cases this strategy ends in frustration and other negative effects among learners to learn as they find the course materials either hard or easy to understand. Feldhusen (1989) states that the idea that lower ability students will look up to gifted students as role models is highly questionable. He believes that learners typically model their behavior after behavior of other learners of similar ability who are coping well with the school. However, some studies show positive effects of this issue as they discuss such differences in learners' background knowledge is useful, expressing this difference in learners' knowledge level causes interaction and challenge among students providing a situation of cooperation among them and ultimately better learning through creating a chance for students of lower English knowledge level to learn from students of higher English knowledge level. From a variety of perspectives it is claimed that learning improves when it is carried out as a constructive and social activity (Barros and Verdejo, 1998).

Studies on The Topic:

Learners as an important factor in Foreign Language Learning and teaching have attracted researchers' attention to study different aspects of this area for a long time. A large number of the studies carried on the role of homogeneity among learners concerning students' general English knowledge in FL classes end up with different results. Some of these studies show good and positive implications of grouping students with higher and lower levels of the initial English ability separately, while there are other studies which do not advocate such grouping of the students. Their findings show students have done better when they are grouped with those students who are not at the same level of general English knowledge that they are.

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Omaggio (2003) quoting from Ellis (1985) claims most scholars and practitioners in the field today agree both the rate and degree of success of second language learning is affected by individual learner differences. He continues many also believe learner factors such as age, aptitude, attitude, motivation, personality, cognitive style and preferred learning strategies need to be considered in any comprehensive theory of second language acquisition. Omaggio also discusses that learners are considered to be a relatively homogeneous lot, while this assumption is being challenged as more and more scholars recognize that differences among people might matter a great deal more than what we had once thought. He refers to a study that was trying to find characteristics of good and poor learners, done by Stevick in which Stevick (1989) pointed out that he understood that successful learners had even been more different from one another. Omaggio also cites from Galloway and Laberca (1990) who discuss learner differences in several categories. First, they contend that people sense things differently, responding to the physical environment around them (time of the day, degree of comfort, degree of physical activity, amount of light, etc.). A second way in which learners differ is in their social preferences—some people prefer learning with others, interacting in small groups or engaging in comparative activities while others may prefer learning alone. A third way is the way in which learners tend to process information mentally. They remark cognitive dimensions as; Field Independence, Breadth of Categorization, Leveling-Sharpening, Impulsive Reflectiveness, Systematicness, Tolerance of Ambiguity and Flexibility-Inflexibility that all have to be taken into account.

Brown (2001) contends as, "Hardly a teaching day goes by in this profession without someone referring to students' proficiency levels with the terms 'beginning', 'intermediate' or 'advanced'". He believes, teaching learners with different levels of proficiency as divided according to ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1986), many factors as 'student's cognitive learning processes', 'the role of the teacher', 'authenticity of language', 'fluency and accuracy', 'student creativity', 'techniques' and etc, which will differ among many learners must always be taken into account in language teaching. He also suggests that concerning techniques used for teaching students of beginning level, short and simple techniques must be used, as mechanical—oral repetition and other drilling. Teacher-initiated questions followed by student-initiated ones and group and pair activities will dominate at this level.

Ur (1996) under the topic of Large Heterogeneous Classes points out that such classes are the most problematical. To define a large class, refers to study done by the team of *the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Project* (Coleman *et al.,* 1989) which indicates that an average number for a large class may be around 50 students. In his comments a heterogeneous class is defined as one that has different kinds of learners and that they are different from one another in all sorts of ways that affect how they learn and need to be taught. He lists the set of significant problems in classes of this type.

1. Discipline. I have discipline problems in these classes; I find them difficult to control.
2. Correcting written assignments. I can't keep up with the marking load.
3. Interest. They get bored: I can't find topics and activities that keep them all interested.
4. Effective learning for all. I can't make sure they are all learning effectively. The tasks I provide are either too difficult or too easy for many of them.
5. Materials. I can't find suitable: the textbooks are homogeneous—rigidly aimed at one kind of learner, with no options or flexibility.
6. Individual awareness. I can't get to know and follow the progress of all the individuals in my class: There are too many of them and they are all so different.
7. Participation. I can't activate them all: only a few students—the most proficient and confident ones—seem to respond actively to my questions.

He suggests categorizing the problems of students into three groups of 'crucial', 'fairly important' and 'not important' that should be solved as much as possible. He also lists some differences between learners in heterogeneous classes. They are; language-learning ability, language knowledge, cultural background, learning style, attitude to the language, mother tongue, intelligence, work knowledge, learning experience, knowledge of other languages, age or maturity, gender, personality, confidence, motivation, interests, independence, self-discipline, educational level.

It is of interest to note that Ur believes there are some advantages in heterogeneous classes. Such classes provide a much richer pool of human resources than do smaller or less mixed classes. There is educational value in the actual contact between very different kinds of people. The fact that the teacher is very much less able to attend to every individual means that in order to function well the students themselves must help by teaching each other and working together. These classes provide greater opportunity for creativity, innovation and general development.

Stern (1983) points out language teachers have looked upon language learners with fixed assumptions about how a learner should react to a given curriculum or a particular teaching approach, only to be surprised again and again, and often to be quite shocked, by the variety of reactions on the part of learner. These differences were somehow not allowed for in language teaching methods and textbooks in spite of the fact that educational

psychology had for decades recognized, emphasized and investigated the concept of individual learner differences. He contends that in formulating a language teaching theory our conceptualizations of learner factors must, for the present, remain somewhat tentative ; factors as the 'age', 'language learning aptitude and other cognitive characteristics' and 'affective and personality factors'. Some studies, for example showed that the brain of young learners are more receptive to the development of speech mechanisms than adult's (Lenneberg 1967). Other investigators offered more cognitive explanations in terms of Piagetian stages of intellectual growth (Rosansky 1975; Krashen 1981). Stern also points out others' findings that advanced an opposing viewpoint. In fact they argued that greater cognitive maturity and greater learning experience on the part of the older language learners are assets. According to Stern(1983),a summary of large number of research on the age question by Krashen *et al.,* (1979) showed adults and older children initially acquire the second language faster than young children(older-is-better for the rate of acquisition) , but young second language acquirers will usually be superior in terms of ultimate attainment (Younger-is-better in the long run). Concerning language aptitude, he says some language learners appear to have a 'gift for languages' which others lack and it has obvious implications for planning language teaching. He clarifies the point as an aspect of language aptitude that aptitude is not a single entity, but a composite of different characteristics which come into play in second language learning. He further discusses the individual's 'cognitive style' as an influencing factor that leads in appearance of learners' individual differences; Field Dependence or Independence, First Language Interference, Broad and Narrow Categorizers and etc.

Robinson and Gilabert (2007) in a part of their study on the effects of task complexity on individual differences-task interactions, discuss that the Cognition Hypothesis acknowledges that learner factors (contributing to perceived difficulty) interact with task factors (contributing to their complexity) in determining the extent of the effects of task difficulty. They continue as, ' when the ability and affective factors drawn on in meeting complex task demands are high in any group of learners, then the effects will be found more clearly , in contrast to learners low in the ability and affective variables implicated in successful complex task performance.' They refer to an example of this interaction of task difficulty and task complexity with language production which was found by Robinson. In that example, only those learners low in output anxiety responded to complex reasoning task demands by producing the predicted increasingly complex speech. Learners high in output anxiety were not induced by task demands to push or stretch production in this way. Individual differences in task-relevant abilities and affective factors can be expected to increasingly differentiate task-based learning and performance as tasks increase in complexity. Their discussions, in fact, highlight the role of differences among learners in their success in learning in Task-based approach language teaching.

The following studies more directly advocate the adequacy of having homogeneous or heterogeneous students in groups. Schunk (1987) states that learners of low and average ability do not model themselves on fist learners. It appears that "watching someone of similar ability succeed at a task raises the observers' feeling of efficiency and motivates them to try the task (1989). In other words, students gain most from watching someone of similar ability cope, i.e., demonstrate perfect performance from the outset (Allen, 1991). Oaks (1990a, 1990b) discuss that a few decades ago, such ideas reached to its extreme form and became the rationale of the homogeneous grouping practice to the extent that it has been a very dominant grouping strategy in the United States and has used a model that typically groups students together on ability or achievement as the deciding variable. Allen (1991) and Robinson (1990) maintain that high-achievers can be held back by having to explain materials to their low-achieving group-mates, a finding that implicitly undermines the heterogeneous grouping of the learners. In fact, advocates of heterogeneous grouping insist on having learners of diverse ability levels. Webb (1985) and Dansereau (1988) argue that high-achievers would benefit most from heterogeneous grouping since they provide frequent elaborated explanations. A study by Loveless (1999) showed that heterogeneous grouping was found more common in elementary schools and homogenous grouping is more widespread in secondary schools. As it is evidenced in research findings discussed above, there is no clear-cut solution to use of either heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping strategies. Both groups seem to have merits in particular situations. Regarding the effects of heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping in undergraduate courses, two studies by Lawrenz and Munkh (1984) and Watson and Marshal (1999) both completed in science classroom, made such comparisons and although both of them found that the homogeneously-grouped students achieved at somewhat higher levels, neither comparison reached the 0.5 level of statistical significance. Sharon and Sharon (1976) recommend heterogeneous grouping with regard to personality and expressive styles. They believe this can help stimulate group discussion and provide needed skills and abilities. It might be inferred that the reviewed research findings so far show that homogeneous grouping is more beneficial, however according to some other studies actual use of such grouping in the classroom has been unusual. Most of the classroom instructors based on the primary concern in cooperative learning which is to maximize heterogeneity of skills and abilities, preferred the heterogeneous grouping (Miller and Harrington, 1992).

As the findings and results of the different research show, there are many questions when grouping students into classes. Different solutions are offered to many of these questions subsequent to the experimentation and findings of the different studies. Baer (2003), finding the superiority of homogeneous grouping over

heterogeneous, claims that there is no reason why cooperative learning groups can not be homogeneous with respect to academic achievement and heterogeneous with respect to other student characteristics including gender, race or ethnicity. Other studies suggest the practice of homogeneous grouping for certain ability levels. For example they believe that lower-achieving and average-achieving learners benefit most from homogeneous groups since they model their behavior on the behavior of others who are at the same level of ability with themselves (Pica and Doughty, 1985). So it seems that enough investigation is required to group students in order to have better achievement of the designed objectives for the students, the teachers and the designers of course materials as well.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The students of 4 classes, 225 students in Abhar Islamic Azad University, who took the course of 'Preliminary English,' were considered for the study. 120 students were randomly selected, that is, 60 students from every two classes. The first 60 students were considered as the experimental group and the other 60 as the control group. For the purpose of evaluating the subjects' proficiency level and separating the students in the experimental group into two groups with higher level of general English and lower level of general English knowledge, the 'Nelson Test, 050 D' was administered. The two groups had nearly the same level of initial English knowledge subsequent to the scores taken form the Nelson Test. Based on the design of the study, the experimental group was divided into two groups of the students who had higher initial scores and the students who had lower ones in the pre-test (Nelson Test). The students of these two groups were taught differently designed materials separately in different classes by the same teacher for 8 weeks- a session every week. The students in the control group which had both of the students, that is, the students who had higher initial scores and the students who had lower ones in the pre-test, were taught the previously taught-not specially designed materials- together in the same class, for the same period as the other two groups, by the same teacher. During the sessions, the students were asked to try not to be absent or late in an effort to help the study have reliable findings.

An achievement test was given to all of the students at the end of the study which was after 8 weeks of teaching. The achievement test for the first experimental group and the control group who both had been taught the same materials with very slight difference was the same. However, another achievement test which had been developed based on the materials taught at the time of the study-8 weeks of teaching- was administered to determine the learning accomplishment of the students of the second experimental group; the students who had shown to be of higher level of general English proficiency.

The Proficiency Test:

As it is evidenced in the following tables (1and 2), the two groups of subjects have scored very similar results. The mean for both groups is nearly the same: 21.8 for G(i) and 21.7 for G(ii). The SD amount for the scores of the groups of subjects is also very close: 8.14 for G(i) and 7.39 for G(ii). Other measures also show high similarity between scores of the subjects in the two groups. While the scores could range from 0─50, the highest score for G(i) is 32; the lowest is 5 so the Range is 27. For G(ii) the highest score is 37; the lowest is 6 so the Range is 31. The total of scores for G(i) is 1302 and for G(ii), it is 1308. This was an attempt to find out if the subjects in the two groups were homogeneous regarding their basic English knowledge, that is, if the students were at a similar or the same level of general English knowledge up to then. In fact, in analyzing the results it was concluded that there were not any major differences between the two groups with regard to their basic or background English knowledge.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for the Proficiency Test G(i).

N	60
Mean	21.8
Median	19.5
Mode	18
SD	8.14
Variance	66.25
Range	32
Minimum	5
Maximum	32
Sum	1302

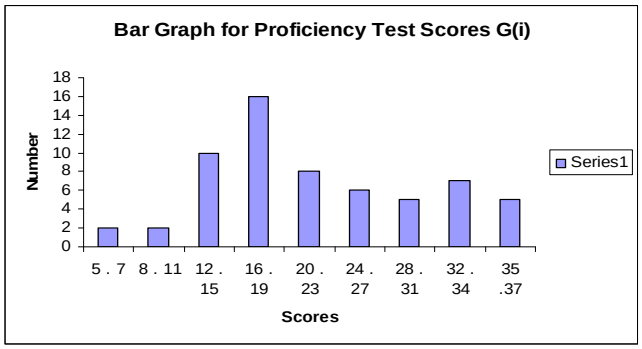
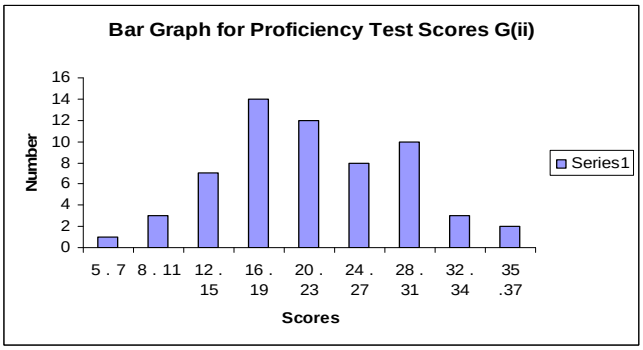


Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for Proficiency Test G(ii).

N	60
Mean	21.7
Median	22
Mode	22
SD	7.39
Variance	54.61
Range	31
Minimum	6
Maximum	37
Sum	1308



Based on scores on the proficiency test, the first group, G(i), was divided into two groups of G(i)1 and G(i)2, each having 30 students, so that they could be taught differently designed materials in two different classes. In fact, half of the students who had scored close or below the mean were assigned as G(i)1, and the other half who had scored close or over the mean as G(i)2.

It needs to be pointed out that the materials for the two G(i) classes were designed appropriate to their English background knowledge level. The materials to be taught for G(i)1 were designed to be at a lower level of difficulty, as these students had earlier shown a lower level of English knowledge. Moreover, the group of G(i)2 also took specially designed materials for their course; their materials were at a higher level of difficulty compared with the materials for G(i)1, as these subjects had earlier shown to be of a higher level of general English knowledge. Therefore, the materials for both groups were designed appropriate to their English background knowledge.

As mentioned, the subjects in G(ii) were placed in two other classes apart from G(i), but were not separated by score. In fact G(ii) included students of both higher and lower levels of general English knowledge according to the results of their proficiency test in the same class. This group, G(ii) that stood as the control group also encountered no changes in their course materials. The same materials previously used for all students, not specially designed materials, were presented as the course materials for G(ii) students. The teacher for all groups (for classes, G(i)1, G(i)2 and two classes of G(ii)) was the same.

The Achievement Test:

The different classes were held for 8 weeks─ one two hour session every week. After being taught for 8 weeks, all subjects, students of G(i)1, G(i)2 and G(ii), took an achievement test to determine any difference in learners' success in achieving the objectives of the course. The achievement tests had been individually (course) developed on the materials taught during 8 sessions of instruction. The items of questions used in these tests were, to 80 percent, similar or the same regarding their difficulty. The results of the achievement test for

different groups were collected, organized, analyzed and compared. The following tables 3, 4 and 5 show statistics and graphic representations of the results for T2 (Achievement Test) for all of the groups.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for Achievement Test G(i)1.

N	30
Mean	12.63
Median	13.5
Mode	–
SD	3.51
Variance	12.32
Range	12
Minimum	6
Maximum	18
Sum	379

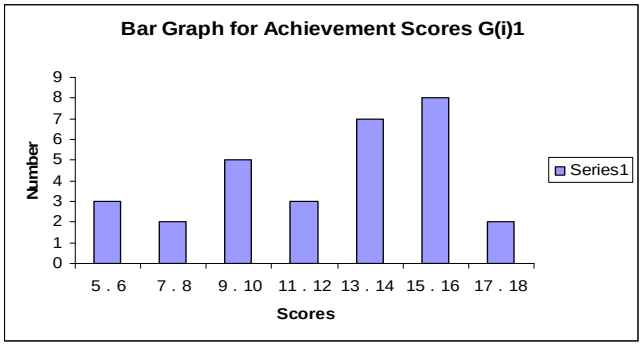


Table 4: Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for Achievement Test G(i)2.

N	30
Mean	12.51
Median	12.5
Mode	12
SD	3.28
Variance	10.75
Range	13
Minimum	5
Maximum	18
Sum	375.5

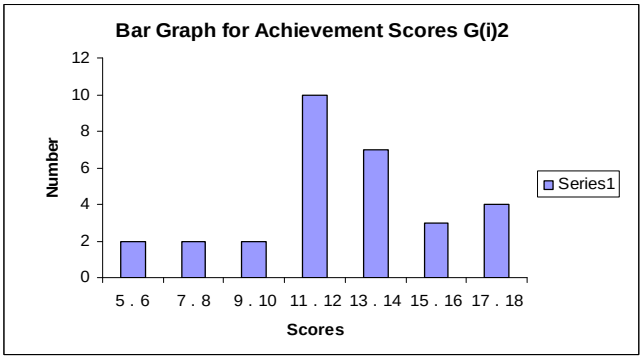
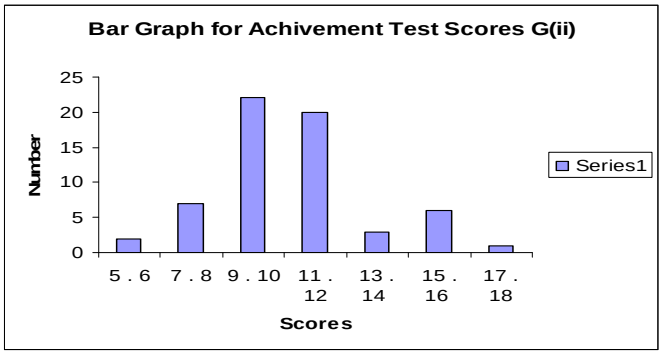


Table 5: Descriptive Statistics and Graphic Representation for Achievement Test G(ii).

N	60
Mean	11.09
Median	10.75
Mode	10
SD	2.4
Variance	5.76
Range	11
Minimum	6
Maximum	17
Sum	665.5



Two t-tests were also used to show whether the difference between the means of the scores of the groups (Gii, the control group, Gi (1) and Gi (2), the experimental groups) in achievement tests was significant enough. The purpose of t-tests was also to assess the hypothesis, which assumed that 'separating the students taking Preliminary English Course, regarding their basic English knowledge, into 2 groups of the students with higher level of general English knowledge and the students with lower level of general English knowledge and teaching especially developed course materials based on the students' initial general English knowledge has a positive effect on the students' achievement of the course materials.

In t-table, it was observed that when the 'c' was smaller than 0.05, with the 'df' of 120, the critical value would be 1.98. As it is shown in the tables below the t-observed values are greater than t-critical values, implying that the hypothesis is accepted. In other words, the treatment was effective enough to make a significant difference between the students with higher initial English knowledge and the students with lower initial English knowledge in achieving devised material for Preliminary English Course.

Table 6: Comparative tables of t-observed and t-critical: Gi(1) compared with G(ii), and Gi(2) compared with Gii.

t-critical	two-tailed	df	t-observed
1.98	0.05	88	2.11

t-critical	two-tailed	df	t-observed
1.98	0.05	88	2.2

Discussion:

These findings confirm the hypothesis that separating the students taking Preliminary English Course, regarding their basic English knowledge, into 2 groups of the students with higher level of general English knowledge and the students with lower level of general English knowledge and teaching especially developed course materials based on the students' initial general English knowledge has a positive effect on the students' achievement of the course materials. As tables 3, 4 and 5 show the students in experimental groups have had better scores in the achievement test, therefore, it becomes evidenced that students can attain better in classes where students are homogeneous regarding their background English knowledge. In other words, homogeneous classes have better accomplishments for both the teacher and students by providing a learning situation where the teacher has easier job since he/she can help the materials be tailored to the students' current level of general English knowledge.

It seems that having students of similar or same level of general English knowledge has a helpful impact on motivating most of the students to learn. "Watching someone of similar ability succeed at a task raises the observers' feeling of efficiency and motivates them to try the task (1989). In other words, students gain most from watching someone of similar ability cope, i.e., demonstrate perfect performance from the outset (Allen, 1991). However, such classes with homogeneous students may fail in producing situations where low-achieving students have opportunities to learn from high-achieving ones, or where high-achiever learn more by explaining the lessons for the other students. High-achievers would benefit most from heterogeneous grouping since they provide frequent elaborated explanations Webb (1985) and Dansereau (1988).

An important advantage of grouping homogeneous students in the same class is the fact that the teacher does not waste the time and energy for trying to be assured that the materials to-be-taught can equally be learned by all the students; in most of the heterogeneous classes, some part of the teacher's time and energy is devoted to help those students who not been able to obtain the taught materials because they are in lower level of general English knowledge in comparison with other students in the same class. As a result, the teacher can have more time and design and use more activities that will promote learning for all students. This time-saving can certainly benefit the students by providing them with more chance to learn.

A good point about findings of this study is that they concern the work of students, teachers as well as course material designers. This study's findings show a significant role of the homogeneity of the students regarding their initial English knowledge in grouping students who take Preliminary English Course in universities. It further proves the positive role of tailoring the course materials to the students' initial knowledge in English. So it can be concluded that to have a better learning of the course materials in the classes of Preliminary English Course in universities, students have to be separated and grouped based on their initial English knowledge, and teaching the same materials to the students with different initial English knowledge levels is not suggested. In other words, students are suggested to be taught in classes with the students of similar or the same general English knowledge level. And as it is discussed and suggested in Crashen's 'i+1', the materials devised as the course materials should be what they have the ability to learn with regard to their prior knowledge that can accelerate their learning new materials.

More importantly and efficiently is to convince the university education officials of the fact that allowing classes with 60 students or even occasionally with more than 60 students in Preliminary English Course endangers the achievement of the objectives of the course. And this is neither beneficial for the students nor the teachers. Certainly, when there is a failure in achieving objectives of one course, this would impact achieving the objectives of the other relevant courses as well, ending in a deduction in the quality of the education in the universities.

Teachers need to know that they would have a hard job teaching a class consisting of students with differences, including the difference studied in this research- the students' basic English knowledge before teaching the course materials. If they face a group of students who are not at the same level of general English knowledge, they might find some of the students good and fast in learning the taught materials, while the rest of the students may be slow or unable to learn the same materials. Such teachers should try to have some plans to manage such a class so that the class is enough useful for all of the students.

Conclusion:

The obtained data was studied carefully in an attempt to analyze and utilize the data and draw conclusions and to present the results and findings of this study. The scores for the achievement tests of the students subsequent to teaching the different classes do not show the same similarity which could be seen in scores of the proficiency test before the study. The score scale for T2, the achievement test, was 0─20. As shown in tables 3, 4 and 5 above, all of the subjects in all of the groups have taken the achievement test. There were 60 subjects in G(i)1 and G(i)2 (tables 3 and 4), 30 subjects in each, and 60 subjects in G(ii) (table 5) for a total of 120 students.

The results of the second test shows that the mean for G (i)1 and G(i)2 are 12.63 and 12.51, while the mean for G(ii) is 11.09. These average scores on the second achievement tests show better learning of the course materials by students in G(i)1 and G(i)2 compared to the students in G(ii). Other measures, as listed in the tables, also show the positive difference in students' achievement when the course materials are tailored to their initial test scores. Another reason, as important as using well-designed materials, is teaching students with higher and lower general English knowledge separately in different classes, not in the same class. Comparing the whole results and findings proves the hypothesis that grouping the students who take 'Preliminary English Course' in university, based on their initial general English knowledge scores is important and worthwhile. Separating the students and teaching specialized and appropriately designed course materials to them has led and will lead to better learning and higher scores for both students with initial higher and lower levels of general English proficiency. This is in comparison with those students who have similar initial scores but who are not separated regarding their initial general English knowledge, that is, both of the students with higher and lower general English knowledge have been taught in the same class, and who are not taught the course materials which have not been devised based on the students' initial ability of English knowledge.

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