



The Road to English Proficiency: Understanding the Experience of Absolute Beginners in Morocco's Common Core Classes

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Abstract: In the Moroccan education system, teachers of English can face the unique challenge of teaching absolute beginners and engaging them within large, multilevel common core classes. This article examines the critical role played by teachers in promoting active participation among these learners who are at the early stages of their English learning. The article highlights the complexities of teaching large classes, where diverse learner abilities require innovative strategies to ensure effective learning. By addressing the unique needs of absolute beginners, teachers must employ a variety of techniques to foster an effective learning environment. The paper also emphasizes the importance of understanding learners' needs in order to tailor lessons that build confidence and encourage inclusion into the overall classroom dynamic. Through an exploration of these elements, the article aims to provide insights into best practices for teachers attempting to enhance participation and educational outcomes for absolute beginners in Moroccan multilevel classrooms.

Keywords: absolute beginners – absolute beginners' participation – teaching large classes – teaching multilevel classes – learners' needs.

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1 Introduction

During my internship in a Moroccan public high school, and especially while teaching common core classes English, I noticed that there were particular students who did not seem to be part of the classroom and never tried to speak up. They were most of the time in their seats slipping into invisibility. I talked to my host teacher about it and he said that those were beginner students. Some of them fall in the category of false beginner; they have already studied some English in middle school but it was not enough to make them understand even the basics of the language. The others are called absolute beginners as they have had no prior interaction with English at all and this issue was thought provoking and caught my full interest. One of the main purposes of a would be teacher, teacher trainee, or teacher in general, is to breed educated and insightful students who are ready and excited to share their views on any given topic. On the other hand, every school system and teacher around the world faces the challenge of educating students efficiently while meeting each one's needs. However, this paper intends to achieve two main objectives. In the first place, it attempts to investigate on how to ensure teaching English as a foreign language, taking into consideration learners' needs. In addition, to find ways to remedy the difficulties beginner learners face in participating in the classroom. And for that, we have two fundamental questions which are about how can teachers ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn and reach their full potential

regardless of their lingual level, and how can they encourage beginners to feel comfortable participating in the classroom?

2 Teaching Large Classes

Seeing a class as small or large refers principally to the teachers' experience with teaching classes of different numbers of students. As an example, a teacher who is used to teach a class of 40 students may consider a class of 60 students as a large class (Todd, 2006). However, Brown (2001) believes that an ideal class should not exceed 12 students. In other words, a class should be big enough to provide diversity, yet it should be small enough to provide students with opportunities to participate and receive the attention needed. In fact, the average number of students in a class in Morocco is 30, and can be up to 40 in some cases. Moreover, no matter what teaching experience a teacher have had in the past, They consider the number of students in a Moroccan class is big. In fact, every teacher faces a number of issues related to teaching and learning in large multilevel classes. Many teachers feel surrounded with the problems of controlling; keeping students focused and speaking in English (Treko, 2012). However, large classes can be time requiring and challenging for the teacher, demanding more time to be allocated to instruction, managing tasks and behavior. Thus, it leaves less time for actual instruction to take place (Wilson, 2006; Holloway, 2002).

3 Teaching Multilevel Classes

Having a class in which learners are homogeneous in terms of proficiency is what most teachers around the world hope for. Nonetheless, what they hope for is, regrettably, not coming to fruition. Most of them find themselves teaching a class of thirty or more, even more troubling is that those students often exhibit a wide variety of abilities. In that sense, and as stated by Roberts (2007), we find students who are below-level, some are at-level and others are above-level; and that is the general truth about most EFL classes. In that fashion, it is fair to say that most language classes are heterogeneous, as all learners differ from one another in aptitude, proficiency, style, ability, age, motivation, skills and intelligence. (Bell, 2004; Hess, 2001; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). This was also admitted by Ur (1996) when she explained that, in reality, there is no such thing as a 'homogeneous' class, as no two learners are truly alike. Therefore, all classes of more than one learner are in fact heterogeneous and a real problem which "deserves far greater professional attention" as stated by Hedge (2000) and "demands study and guidance" as mentioned by Ur (1996). Moroccan students are no exception, each one of them in any given class vary considerably from one another in their language and literacy skills, which makes them in need of a great deal of attention and encouragement.

4 Learners' Needs

Due to the large population of students, Hess (2001) states that in large multilevel classes, it is not an easy task for the teacher to meet the needs and interests of all students. Using authentic materials and implementing interactive activities in large classrooms is a difficult and challenging task. According to Hess (2001), brilliant or advanced learners tend to get bored easily in mixed ability classroom. When it comes to less good students, they tend to feel challenged in a negative way, which can cause agitation in the classroom. More specifically, in Moroccan public high schools, students tend to skip classes quite often. This problem does not only concern struggling or uninterested students, even highly capable brilliant students who actually come to school but spend hours in the courtyard because they are not really learning anything new in the classroom. As another point, when teaching a multilevel, large classroom, it is unrealistic to expect having a perfect class where you meet the needs of all of your students. Roberts (2007) argues that, teaching to the middle is the solution. That is to say, teachers can start their lessons by elements that are not too easy nor too hard, and then, as the session goes, he or she can assign different level appropriate tasks. In that sense, you begin your lesson with the whole group of students, then during the lesson you divide groups according to their levels, and then finish the tasks with the whole class. This way, you keep the below and above level students interested.

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Figure 1. Title of figure.

5 Absolute Beginners

Harmer (2007) claims that students are generally described in three levels, beginner, intermediate and advanced. These categories are further divided into absolute beginners and false beginners. As a matter of fact and as a teacher of English as a foreign language, you come across an absolute beginner intermittently. An individual who has had no exposure to English, a person with limited command of basic vocabulary, verb or greetings. In Morocco, only students in private institutions have the opportunity to learn English in primary school. On the other hand, and in some public schools, students get the chance to learn English in middle school. Other public schools do not offer English as a subject at all in middle school; they provide instruction in either Spanish or German. In this regard, when this category of students reach high school, they find themselves lost, which hinders their ability to learn the English language since they simply have had no previous exposure to the language.

6 Absolute Beginners' Participation

Simply put, participation means being an active learner, and to be an active learner, one needs to engage actively in the classroom. That is to say, learners need to ask questions, give their opinions and answer questions asked by their teacher or classmates. According to Davis (2009), if students were more willing to engage and participate in the classroom, a highly conducive environment of learning would be formed. Based on a study done by Theberge (1994), students who actively participate in class tend to achieve more academically. However, beginner students present a special case, as they have more than one issue that stops them from being involved in the classroom. Similarly to intermediate or advanced students, beginners might feel reluctant to speak up because of their fears of being judged, but they have not only fear to worry about, they have the added language barrier challenge. They simply are not linguistically equipped, which makes their reluctance to participate in class comprehensible to some extent. They are unable to hold even a brief conversation, let alone give their opinions and express themselves openly in front of the classroom audience. In the Moroccan context, students who have never had any contact with the English language are most of the time sitting in the back and avoiding any kind of contact with the teacher. Many beginner learners perceive themselves as incapable of speaking or understanding English in their class, which sometimes underlies a very poor self-confidence and a lower self-esteem. These students may just as well believe they cannot speak English in class particularly when required to produce it in front of their peers or an evaluative instructor. When you ask them why they are not participating or doing any basic task, they would use the same excuse repeatedly 'I do not understand English'. Others, on the other hand, do not understand most of the sayings yet they do their best to participate, sometimes in Arabic or French, but In the grand scheme of things, they actually try. In fact, here comes the role of the teacher. As stated by Siti Maziha, Nik Suryani & Melor (2010), boosting beginners' confident can pave the way for a higher interest to learn and know more by asking questions, engaging and discussing topics and sharing opinions.

7 Conclusion

It is commonly acknowledged that classrooms are richer when all voices are heard. However, it is nearly impossible to reach when you have a large, multilevel classroom to teach. In circumstances where students are less active or passive in the classroom, it is pertinent for the instructors to encourage active involvement, especially while teaching beginner level learners. The teachers need to be more prudent as beginners are very sensitive towards learning. For this cause, and as a recapitulation of what has been mentioned in the previous parts, the main objectives of this study were to investigate on how to ensure teaching English as a foreign language, taking into consideration learners' needs, as well as to find ways to remedy the difficulties beginner learners face in participating in the classroom.

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