Some of the challenges of teaching multilevel classes and suggestions for how to deal with the situation

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Abstract. Teaching English to Engineering or Business students has always been a challenge. One of the major reasons which makes this task particularly challenging is the fact that, being graduates of various high schools, they join the university having very different levels of English. Some may have started English in kindergarten, while others only in high school. Some speak it fluently; others may barely be able to introduce themselves despite having studied it for a similar number of years as the former. This paper takes a look at the major challenges teachers of English in university are faced with when teaching multilevel classes, and attempts to offer some suggestions as to how to deal with this situation while at the same time keeping the quality of the teaching-learning process.

1. Introduction

English has been the lingua franca for a long time now, with people in Business, as well as people in IT or similar fields employing it on a daily basis throughout Europe. Multinational companies prefer it as a tool for daily communication or when doing business, and thus schools at all levels (secondary schools, high schools and universities alike) adapt their curriculum in order to meet the requirements of the marketplace, especially of the labour market.

Everyone is aware of the fact that knowledge of a foreign language, English in particular, is of utmost importance; consequently English is a compulsory subject in schools, high schools and universities. The latter usually include English as a compulsory subject for an average of four semesters for almost all fields of study, except those where English is the major. Once students are enrolled at the university, they know that they will “meet” with English for at least two hours per week. At this point, the major issue professors of English are faced with is the students’ level which is virtually never homogenous. Due to the fact that some students master the language very well, while others are barely able to communicate, there will always be a problem with keeping students focused: if the level of information imparted is too low for the students with higher level of knowledge in English, invariably the professor faces the danger of losing the former in terms of attention and involvement. If, on the other hand, the level of information imparted is too high for those with lower level of knowledge in English, they will be the ones not focusing on whatever is being taught or presented [1]. And when students stop focusing during classes, the handiest tool approached by them in order to kill time is the smart device.

This paper looks at the challenges professors of English are faced with when teaching multilevel classes, with particular focus on the use of smart devices during courses, as a means of distraction which can eventually be turned into a useful tool during the English courses. The fact that classes of
students are eclectic in terms of level of English, directly leads to the use of smart devices and/or phones during courses. Thus the challenge faced by the professors who teach English is twofold: on the one hand students do not pay attention because the level of the knowledge imparted by the professor is either too low for them or too high (depending on their level of knowledge), and on the other hand not paying attention prompts them to find other ways to “entertain” themselves; and the most common tool at hand is the smart device.

A group of 130 students were subjects in a survey inquiring if and to what extent the smart device is used during the courses, what the reasons are for the use of these devices during courses and what would actually determine students to use them less for entertainment purposes during courses. The results of the survey are presented hereafter, as is the interpretation of these results.

2. The challenges: lack of interest and distractions
The issue of the lack of attention in class has always been a challenge for teachers and professors alike. The fundamental reason for this lack of attention is simply the fact that people have changed, yet the educational system has failed to evolve alongside them. Sir Ken Robinson, the world-renowned educationalist, stated in his talk Changing Education Paradigms held in London, June 16, 2008, that the current educational system was designed during the Enlightenment for a different mindset and that we are essentially using the same model despite the fact that it has been proven inappropriate for the current generations. If at first people were divided between smart people and non-smart people or academic and non-academic, as Sir Ken Robinson put it, these day we know that this is a dysfunctional classification.

This “intellectual model of the mind” has been proven flawed, and Sir Ken Robinson states that while it was beneficial for some, it “has caused chaos in many people’s lives” by causing, he considers, “the modern epidemic” of ADHD. In his opinion, the fact that children are bombarded with information from dozens of sources (television channels, advertising, smart devices, computers) represents the major reason for them to become distracted in class, and thus they prefer to focus on these sources of distraction rather than on the “boring” staff being presented in class. We tend to agree with Sir Ken Robinson: if one should compare the information provided by the internet or the television with the information presented in class, the former seems by far more interesting, and the responses given by students to the fifth question of the survey they participated at as part of the research carried out for this paper seem to confirm this view [2], [3].

Professors seem to lose ground in favour of technology. It is virtually impossible for a professor of English, in this particular case, to be more entertaining than a game or more versatile than the smart toy itself. Yet the major advantage that professors of English (and not only) do have, is their creativity, which may eventually be the only weapon against boredom in class [4].

In order to be able to properly approach the issue of attention versus distraction during the English courses, a survey was applied to a sample of 130 students from various departments. Most of the students involved in the survey were enrolled at Business Administration, some at Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, and 28 students were from Applied Modern Languages. The field of study had some influence on the responses to some of the question, yet it did not influence the outcome of the survey; it only diversified it slightly.

The questionnaire had only 6 questions, yet it is our opinion that it had the appropriate length and it served its purpose. The first question established the number of smart device holders, whereas the second question inquired about whether respondents used their smart devices/phones during courses. All questions inquired about the use of smart devices not only during English courses but during courses in general. The responses to the first two questions were quite predictable, an overwhelming number of respondents actually admitting to using their smart devices during courses. Even those few students who answered the first question in the negative, i.e. who do not own a smart devices, admitted to using their phones during courses for various reasons. The results are shown bellow in Figure 1.
Unfortunately there were a few inadequacies in the responses, yet these did not negatively influence the outcome of the study. To be more specific, there were respondents who answered the second question in the negative, i.e. they said they did not use their smart device/phone during courses, yet continued the survey by providing answers to the subsequent questions, which actually contradicted their negative answer to the second question.

The third question referred to the amount of time spent on the smart device during courses, expressed in percentages. The percentages provided in response to this question are estimations of the respondents, thus some degree of subjectivity should be expected, yet not considered out of the ordinary. The degree of subjectivity depends on the respondents’ personalities and the image they wanted to reflect about themselves in their responses, even though they were anonymous. These variables though, should not be considered as shortcomings of the survey; it is the average that should be taken into account, and it is the average which provides the clearer and more realistic image.

Thus the situation reflected by the responses provided to the third question (as can be seen in Figure 2) seems to be quite serious. The survey showed that out of 130 respondents, 23 use their smart devices during courses, on average, about 10% of the time, whereas 24 respondents admitted to using them about 20-25% of the time, and 22 of them 30-35%. This proves that more than half of the students involved in the survey actually spend, on average, a quarter of the time during a course on doing something other than focusing on what is being taught or discussed during that particular course. The fact that 16 respondents provided answers which range in the category 0-5% is slightly encouraging, yet what should also be considered is that 19 students said they spend 40-50% of the time during a course using their smart devices, whereas 13 admitted to using them more than half of the time.

Figure 1. Use of smart devices/phones
It is our opinion that these results are disturbing and that what they actually do is give feedback on the quality of the educational system in general, not only on the material being taught or the professors involved in the educational processes. They show the students’ lack of interest in what they are studying (practically by choice), in the information provided and the knowledge shared by the professor.

Due to the fact that information has been made so widely available through the existence of the internet, as well as the wide range of printed material (which is rapidly losing ground itself in favour of the former), capturing and keeping the attention of such an eclectic audience, who is constantly bombarded by information from the moment they are born, and is constantly faced with amazing leaps in technology that makes the one man show represented by the professor standing in front of this challenging audience so increasingly less appealing and interesting, has become a daunting task which is slowly turning the afore-mentioned professor into an entertainer meant to keep the audience’s attention or otherwise lose the audience completely.

With more than half of the respondents admitting to using their smart devices for almost a quarter of the time during a course, and with about a quarter of them admitting to using technology during courses half of the time or even longer, lack of attention to what is being taught, or to the professor, has become an ever worrying issue these days. If students do not find the information being presented challenging, their attention can easily be diverted to other, more appealing topics (and socializing seems to be the most appealing pastime activity amongst students).

Question number 4 in the questionnaire focuses precisely on this, i.e. the things that divert students’ attention during courses. Respondents were asked to name the three most often used applications during courses. It came as not surprise that Facebook was the one application most students mentioned, followed at a great distance by Instagram and Facebook messenger. Thus it seems that socializing is the activity in which students get mostly involved during courses, this being one of their favourite activity outside class as well. Socialization is one basic human need, and it appears that if students are not challenged during courses, they will switch to doing what they like and are most used to doing, i.e. socialize.
What we nevertheless find interesting in these responses are those applications that are mentioned by fewer respondents. It is not surprising at all that Facebook be mentioned by so many respondents, yet the fact that there are a few who admit to using their smart device for course-related purposes is quite encouraging. Those who mentioned the calculator as an application used during the courses were students in Engineering and a few in Business Administration, and said they used it in order to do calculations faster. Similarly, those who mentioned the use of dictionaries (and some also mentioned Google translate, yet this answer appears in Figure 3 only under the heading “other”) were students from Applied Modern Languages who actually do translation work and need dictionaries in order to carry out the tasks given to them during certain courses. At this point nevertheless an issue arises: the term “courses” is loosely used throughout this paper and the use of smart devices is mainly reported with reference to courses as lectures, where students merely sit at their desks, listen and write. It is true that certain courses are more prone to having students use their smart devices during the time of the lecture/presentation, and this is the issue of theoretical courses, being less of an issue for practical courses and/or laboratories.

The aspect that needs more attention than the applications being used is actually the reason why students choose to use their smart devices during courses. Question number 5 refers precisely to this
aspect. When asked why they use their smart devices during courses, an overwhelming percentage of respondents (almost half, to be more specific) said that it is boredom that made them turn to their smart toys and not pay attention in class anymore (see Figure 4).

The encouraging aspect at this point is, just like in the previous question, also related to the fact that some students use their smart devices for course-related issues. Thus those using them for computation actually use the technology in question in order to work faster during a certain course which requires complex mathematical calculations to be carried out. Yet it is the reasons of those fitting under the heading “other” that present a quite interesting situation: 3 respondents admitted to actually looking for online support for a specific course, 3 said that they did not understand what the professor was talking about, so instead just killed time playing with their smart toys, 3 admitted to having used their phones as a tool for cheating during exams. For one student there was apparently too much information, so he/she chose to do something less challenging, while one student said he/she used his phone in order to take pictures of the materials presented in order to have time to fill in the information missing from the notes taken during the course (so another course-related purpose, surprising as it may be). And it is these other reasons that can actually function as an indication of how smart devices can actually be integrated in the classroom activities during the English courses in particular.

Finally, the last point in the questionnaire referred to the students’ motivation to stop using their smart devices during courses. Obviously those who said they were using them for course-related purposes did not provide any reason, since for them the phone was practically a tool employed in order to enhance their performance in class. Almost all other respondents, when asked what would motivate them not to use their smart devices during courses, said that a more interesting or a more interactive course would constitute reason enough for them to give up their smart devices during courses. This response goes hand in hand with the response to the previous question, which lists as number one reason for the students’ use of smart devices during courses their boredom. Figure 5 below shows all answers into detail.

![Chart no. 6](chart.png)

**Figure 5.** Motivation to stop using the smart device/phone during courses

When analyzing the other responses provided by students, one can notice that some could not come up with any reason for stopping (18 respondents), others mentioned external motivation such as lack of internet connection (4 respondents) or a depleted battery (8 respondents). Another category of respondents actually focused on the provider of information from an interesting perspective; thus there were 7 who said that the professor should tell a joke or two in order to attract attention, one that said
the professor should be mean and another one who said that the professor should ask the students not to use their smart devices in class. One respondent mentioned the fact that if the course were computer-based, he/she would be more motivated and consequently would pay more attention, whereas one said that it would be helpful if they paid attention in class, and two considered the course too difficult and the task of focusing discouraging and thus they preferred to use their smart devices instead.

It is slightly disturbing to find out that no matter what the professor might do, he/she will fail at keeping all students interested all the time. There will always be some who find him/her too boring and others who think the subject matter is too difficult, some who are simply not attracted by anything or not motivated to pay attention, and the reason need not always be the information or the professor, yet is most often the student himself/herself.

3. Remedial actions

When all this information is applied to the English course, which is by default less theoretical than other courses and implies more practical approaches to it, the situation might not be as gloomy. There may be some remedial techniques which can turn the students’ appeal for technology and social media into a learning instrument, and it does not seem to be that difficult. Inclusion of the smart devices into the English course is the easiest, fastest and most user-friendly solution available.

With the internet swarmed by dictionaries of all types, having the students look up the unknown vocabulary in an on-line dictionary [5-7], or look for synonyms and/or definitions for words and phrases, represents the simplest measure meant to include the smart device in the English courses, and thus, to some extent, satisfy the students’ need to use their smartphones. (We consider it a need indeed based also on the responses provided by the students to question number 5, where more than 18% of the respondents said they used their smart devices out of habit.).

The use of dictionaries is obviously the most common employment of the smart devices during the English course, yet there are many other tasks that can be performed with the smart device during the English course or in preparation for it. An example of such an activity which would imply the use of the smart device in class is looking for extra information about the topic being discussed during a specific lesson, about a certain personality being mentioned or even a certain historical date or event. Smart devices can also be used in class for sharing information in group-based activities. For example, the class is divided into groups and each group looks up certain items of vocabulary or searches for extra information on a certain topic, and groups then share the information amongst them by using a communication tool of choice: e-mail or messaging, even social media communication too [5-7].

The use of smart devices in class can be easily complemented by the use of technology outside class [8], yet with educational purposes obviously. Students these days use computers and laptops on a daily basis. Receiving assignments which require some amount of research represents the perfect opportunity for students to use the internet in order to look for information and then use this information for their assignments, use online dictionaries or materials such as exercises and games available on the internet. On the other hand, the number of games and applications meant for learning a foreign language – English in particular – which are available for download for use on smartphones and/or tablets is growing constantly. The technology-savvy students seem very keen on downloading and using such applications, which can – with some level of creativity – be included in the English course, yet these are more suitable for individual use and use outside the classroom [5-8].

Some English learning activities, for which the use of smart devices can be applied and which can actually be enriched by the use of technology, are the following: translation activities, for which the use of online dictionaries is virtually compulsory; vocabulary activities during which students can look up synonyms or antonyms; checking facts and adding new information to a reading activity [8]. With all the news-reading apps available for smartphones and other smart devices, these can be used for reading the news or other authentic language texts, thus saving paper which would otherwise be used for handouts. And within the same realm of reading activities, smart devices can be used for reading books, manuals and other materials necessary for the classroom activity. Besides, the reading
applications also allow some extent of editing, so students can put down notes, observations or questions they might have while reading a text, and these can then be discussed in class [5-7].

Beside the use of smartphones as communication tools, these can be used for collaborative activities: since students are so keen on social media, they can post links or videos related to the subject of a certain lesson or to the topic of a certain item of reading material. They can share their thoughts and opinions on a certain topic and can even peer-edit and peer-assess their writing tasks. Creating topic-related blogs will most definitely improve their writing and reading skills [5-7]; and these can also be peer edited and peer-assessed, as long as they all have access to them. All these activities benefit from teacher supervision, of course, and thus can also be used by the latter as evaluation tools.

4. Conclusions

When dealing with multilevel classes, the main challenge faced by language teachers is keeping all participants focused, no matter their level of knowledge and/or skills [1]. Keeping all participants active and involved throughout the course is a difficult task in itself during any course but it becomes more difficult during a language course [9] because the teacher stands the risk of loosing the interest of either the students who are advanced, if the course is adapted to the needs of the students with lower level of knowledge, or of the students who are at more beginner level, if the course is adapted to the needs of the more advanced students. Either way, one group of students will lose focus and thus will start looking for alternate ways of keeping their minds busy. In this situation, the handiest tool is the smartphone.

In this paper we investigated the extent to which smart devices are used during courses and the purposes for which these are used, by subjecting 130 students to a survey. According to the results of the survey, most respondents use their smart devices for purposes non-related to the course content. This fact may seem worrying, yet from the point of the view of the teacher of English this situation can be turned around and used to the advantage of the teaching-learning process and all parties involved. Thus the smartphone can actually be integrated into the educational process, and have the students use their devices for in-class communication, cooperation, for reading, writing and listening activities, for obtaining (extra) information, for (self-) evaluation and assessment and other such activities [5-7].

The integration of smart devices into the teaching-learning process during the English courses (and actually during other non-language courses as well) seems to be a solution for fighting lack of attention and even boredom, and keeping students interested and thus more focused. Besides, it is a more environmentally friendly option, since it saves paper [5-6] which would otherwise be used for handouts, for example. It is our opinion that the integration of smart devices into the educational process would benefit both teachers and students, and would maintain active participation in the course, whether we refer to language courses – English in this particular case – or other courses.

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