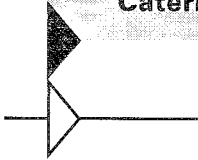


LET THE PROBLEMS COME, AND LET THE LEARNING TAKE PLACE

Catering For Different Kinds Of Learners In A Multilevel (Mixed Ability) Class



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In a sense, every language class can be said to be a multilevel or mixed ability class. This is because every class is made up of a group of individuals, and each of these individuals in some extent, has a different control, knowledge and ability of the language, which means that among them there is a marked difference in language level.

This paper will refer specifically to:

Classes in which there is a clear difference in language level among the students. It can be in the receptive or productive skills, grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, fluency and accuracy, pronunciation, and so on.

Classes in which there are clear differences in learning styles, speed and aptitude.

Classes in which there are different levels of motivation. Some students may have a positive attitude towards learning English, while others may see it as something imposed due to different facts.

Mixed ability classes exist due to many reasons. Here are some:

1. Students come from different learning backgrounds. It means that some may have studied

English in other institutions or schools. Also, there are many other factors and experiences that influence the classroom learning atmosphere such as students who come from an English-speaking family; have traveled to English-speaking countries; have access to TV, computers with English programs, music, and so on.

2. Students progress at different rates. This may be due to different learning styles and the way students respond to teacher's style and approach. Some learners may be primarily visual, or kinesthetic, and if the teacher's approach tends to emphasize on visual elements, the visual learner is likely to progress at a faster rate.

3. Some students find learning a second language easier than others. This constitutes a 'learning aptitude', which helps them in the process of learning the language.

4. Students may already have a positive or negative attitude towards the language or towards themselves as learners.

The variety of factors means that we need to find a variety of solutions or ways to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn. It is a good idea to build a profile of the students, regarding their readiness, interests, and learning styles, every time you take a new class. This will provide useful information. Teachers can set up

classrooms where everyone works towards essential understanding and skills, but uses different contents procedures, and products to get there. This means improving opportunities for weaker students, but also taking into account the strong ones, and by trying to cater for different learning styles in the class teacher can increase learning opportunities for all students.

Learning styles. People learn in different ways, therefore, it is important to identify the different types of learners. We don't need to do a precise classification of our learners, but we need to find out about general tendencies in the class about learning styles and preferences in order to cater the different preferences with different kinds of classroom activities, to favor some teaching approaches, to keep students not only interested and motivated, but also engaged in the learning process, and to make sure nobody will fall behind. It is almost certain that students with some learning styles have been favored in the classrooms, since much teaching has depended on the written word, individual work and teacher in a traditional authoritarian role. Also, the teacher's own style of learning and preferences have influenced his/her teaching style. Therefore, it is important to make a conscious effort to vary the teaching approaches used in the classroom to cater for as many types of

learners as possible.

Classroom management: Good classroom management skills are absolutely necessary since organizing the classroom efficiently and effectively will maximize opportunities for students to learn. Make sure to allow weaker students to participate. It's easy to let stronger students dominate. Make an effort to involve all students. Do not allow weaker students to hide in the back of the room and nominate them to answer easier questions. Check that all students have understood instructions and monitor all the individual, pair and group-work activities. Also, make sure all the students in the class can hear your voice; otherwise, students sitting in the back of the class will stop paying attention. To maintain the interest of your students, vary the tone and the pitch of your voice and make sure to keep track of the teacher talking time. Many teachers have the tendency of talking too much.

Remember students need to feel noticed and valued. Recognizing their good work and efforts is important. Always praise students by saying good, well done, smile, and nod expressing approval. When correcting written work do not focus only on the errors, but comment on what is good.

Management of learning activities: Good management of learning activities ensures that all students, weak and strong, are involved in the lesson. You can achieve this if you:

Plan your instructions in advance and decide exactly what you need to say and how you will say it. Keep the language as simple as possible and instructions as short as possible.

Make sure all students are paying attention before giving the instructions.

Look at the students while you give the instructions. Use the board,

point to the exercise, have stronger students demonstrate with you, and so on.

Use body language and gestures to support what you are saying.

If students look confused, paraphrase what you have said.

Check for understanding by asking questions.

Written instructions are, sometimes, more appropriated. Make sure that everyone understands.

It's a good idea to model a couple of examples before having students involved in the task.

Grouping is an essential technique in mixed ability classes. You will find out that weaker students are more willing to participate in small groups, and ask questions about things they do not understand. There is more time to practice for everyone and the teacher can help more easily the ones who need it. Students can assume different roles according to their level, but monitor so stronger students do not dominate the group. Decide whether you want to group students according to levels. Depending on the activity you may need to group students according to their level and some other times by mixed levels.

Set the time for each activity and warn students few minutes before the end. Make sure students understand they have to stop working even if they have not finished the activity. Always prepare extra activities to do with fast finishers.

Monitor while students are working in order to help and also noting problem areas in order to reinforce them. Go first to the groups that are likely to have difficulties to make sure they are doing well. It also gives you an idea when to stop the activity. Sometimes you have to stop it when most, not all, students have finished it.

When giving feedback to the whole class, make sure all students

have corrected their answers and understood the corrections. It also may be helpful to do peer correction, and focus on those students who experienced most difficulties during the task.

When using the board check it is clear and legible. Write big enough so students in the back can read it. Keep it organized. If students need to copy from the board, give them enough time to do so.

Motivation: Motivating students is an essential factor, which affects learning. In mixed ability classrooms weaker students usually are the ones with least motivation. Try to motivate students by showing them English is interesting and relevant to them, create an English classroom environment, create a good learning atmosphere, where cooperation, tolerance and mutual support are always present, provide opportunities for students to know each other, encourage and train students to listen to each other, don't compare students performances, and the most essential, make lessons enjoyable. If students feel comfortable in a group they will be more open to learning and may develop a more positive attitude towards the language they are studying.

The fact that students enjoy a lesson can provide powerful motivation. How can a lesson be motivating?

Find out what topics interest the students and focus the content of the lesson on the selected topics.

Include variety of activities. Do not always use the textbook. Make sure the pace of the lesson is balanced.

Balance 'serious' activities with 'humorous' activities. Laughter is important, but concentration and quiet times are too.

Vary the objectives: accuracy, fluency, writing, reading, and so on.

Provide balanced activities for each skill. Use listening, reading,

writing, speaking activities more or less in equal amounts.

Vary the way you do things in the class. Do not always follow the same procedures.

Be sensitive to students' moods and flexible. Cater for different learning styles. Include specific activities to cater mixed levels.

Allow opportunities to create and use student's imagination. Prepare materials to match the needs of the students and present them as interestingly and clearly as possible.

Let students know what you are planning to do in a lesson and why.

Others that you can negotiate with your students.

Sometimes it is hard to believe that there are advantages in a multilevel class, but in fact, there are some and it is teacher's job to make all of them. **Flexibility:** because there is not a rigid syllabus; **diversity:** due to the people involved; **interaction:** skills of the advanced students can be put to good use here, while the lower-level students are still challenged too; another advantage is that the class can **encourage** students to grow in much more than just English. A wide range of talents and interests is likely to be displayed in class and students bring all kinds of stories, skills, insights from different backgrounds which contribute to a lively, fascinating classroom environment.

Ways Of Approaching Various Learning Activities In A Multilevel Class

Teachers in general identify their biggest problem with multilevel classes as being one of techniques or methodology. Let's look now at some different ways of approaching various learning activities to ensure that we cater for different types of learners:

The first step in developing a class plan is to find out about students' level of English, identify their weak areas and assess what skills they already have. From the information we gather, we can

decide which items should be covered and developed in class, having in mind short- and long-term objectives, so we can measure progress and assess the effectiveness of our lesson.

We all know of the strains and hard decisions such a situation can impose on teachers. Should you pitch your lessons at a basic level so that the slower students can follow, or at a more advanced level to make sure the stronger ones don't get bored? How can you keep the weaker students from feeling frustrated and the proficient students from feeling under-challenged? What to do with students who try very hard but still do not reach the objectives, or with those who tend to dominate because they know more? And finally, should you speak the mother language in class so that you don't lose anyone along the way, or try to speak English in spite of the protests from those who guarantee they can't understand a word? There are no final answers to any of those questions, but the good news is we are far from being alone on this boat. In fact, mixed-ability classes are the norm in schools throughout the world, not the exception. And there are plenty of teachers developing and suggesting strategies to face a problem that is not about to disappear. These strategies may include:

- Devising graded tasks, i.e., designing activities on the same topic but with different levels of difficulty. Of course that could create two new problems: extra work for the teacher and the possibility that some students feel labeled as weak while others resent having to work "harder". As a possible solution for the first problem we suggest you create a bank of activities, so that your work can be re-used with other groups or exchanged with other teachers. As for the way students may feel about the grading of tasks, first of all try to color/number-code the activities, establishing, for example, "group one will receive a blue worksheet, group two a yellow worksheet and group 3 a green worksheet." Vary those colors/

numbers the next time you have a similar activity, so that there is no association between the color/number of the activities and the level of the sub-groups. Also, make sure there are advantages in belonging to the group of the most advanced students, so that everyone in class will make an effort to progress. Such advantages could be, for example, allowing the students to do their work outdoors, visit the computer lab or explore songs. With a smaller group in the classroom you will also be able to work on specific difficulties, which do not apply to the group as a whole.

- Preparing self-access materials: when the syllabus forces us to move forward and we feel there are students who are not yet ready to go on, one of the alternatives is preparing self-access materials to enable such students to do on their own and at their own pace the extra effort that will help them overcome their difficulties. Self-access materials should contain a very clear explanation of a given topic, followed by exercises and an answer key. Again, preparing extra material for the students may be an extra burden on the teacher at first, but not all of this material has to be made from scratch: a lot of textbooks that we receive from the publishers can be used as sources of materials, and a bank of activities (preferably organized by a group of teachers) will save a lot of work on future occasions.

- Favoring cooperative tasks that demand specific abilities, other than linguistic performance: after Howard Gardner claimed that there is not one, but in fact 8 different types of intelligences, teachers have become more aware of talents their students have that are not necessarily related to the subject they teach. A student who doesn't have a born aptitude for languages, for example, can be a gifted artist, an exceptional musician or a great athlete. That's why, as much as possible, teachers should promote cooperative games and activities in which good linguistic performance

is not enough to win and the weaker students can contribute in the group with other talents or with their knowledge of the world.

- Evaluating differently: within the guidelines imposed by the schools, teachers should always take into consideration the students' progress when assigning a grade. As we have already mentioned, and you probably noticed in your own practice, there are students who try very hard and still don't reach the same academic level of their classmates. This effort just cannot go unnoticed. Although we many times have to conform to written tests imposed by the schools, the students should be encouraged to keep portfolios in which their work is filed and their progress can be easily checked. The assignment of projects is also a great way to evaluate mixed-ability groups, and short quizzes covering single topics should be preferable to cumulative tests or "finals".

- Taking advantage of class management techniques: and we don't mean only moving desks around. Of course a nice seating arrangement (better than the usual

single rows of students, anyway) can help a lot in improving group interaction, but in fact there is a lot more teachers can do. First of all, make sure you vary class dynamics, having a fair share of pair work and group work along with individual tasks. When you have students working in pairs, choose when it's best for weaker students to work with stronger students and when the match should be somewhat homogeneous. Use the board neatly and wisely, since a lot of the students rely on it to catch up on what you are saying. Make a conscious effort of not letting the stronger students dominate by keeping eye contact with all students (not only those near you) and, as much as possible, call all students by their names. Pedagogically speaking, class management is the opposite of improvisation: you simply have to think every single detail ahead, from the way you give instructions to the way you give feedback on what the students have done. Thinking ahead: that's what class management is all about.

- Regarding the proficient students as a positive influence, not

a threat. In other words, let them help. Of course you won't sit back and let the so-called "good" students do your job, but you can encourage them to use their extra knowledge of the language to help their classmates in their work. Peer teaching can be a nice alternative to teacher-guided reviews, for example. Stronger students can also be assigned to check other classmates' assignments before they turn them in-which would not only keep them busy after finishing their own assignments, but also give them a sense of pride for performing such a helpful task and educate them on a cooperative behavior that we know is not very usual in our schools.

There is a proverb which says that necessity is the mother of all inventions. With creativity and some research, the problems that arise everyday in mixed-ability classes can be overcome. Better yet, they may lead to solutions that can be shared with other teachers, thus increasing the range of strategies we have tried to suggest on this paper. So let the problems come; and let the learning take place.

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