

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASS

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Annotation: According to the teachers interviewed, the best way to deal with the problem is to bring back ability grouping. Both the literature and the teachers claimed that a good atmosphere, clear instructions, structure and setting routines were the most important factors when working with mixed ability classes.

Keywords: challenge, mixed-ability classes, experience, atmosphere, assessment.

Working as a teacher in English provides challenges every day. The teacher has to face 25-30 students at a time who are all at different levels of ability, have varying motivation for working with English and have their own special interests and experiences. The teacher meets these mixed-ability classes each day. In this way how a teacher should work in classes in order to help all the students, especially the weaker ones. Most teachers on those occasions have talked about the difficulty of teaching large mixed-ability classes. It is difficult to know how to motivate *all* the students in each class, especially the weaker ones.

The curriculum for the non-compulsory school system, Susan, claims that: “Special attention must be given to those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals of education. For this reason education can never be the same for all”¹. I believe that this is an important starting point when teachers try to find out how to deal with the challenge of teaching mixed-ability classes. The curriculum says that education should be equivalent for all, but that the education can only be equal if we take into account each student’s ability level, ways of learning, interests and so on. This means that the *ways* towards achieving the goals of education can look different for each student in order for the education to be equivalent. English teachers should work in large mixed-ability classes to make sure they help all students improve their English and also to find out what views three upper secondary English teachers have on how to reach all students. Teachers should choose literature about the underachievers and how to help them in class, and literature about how teachers should teach to promote learning for all students.

The advice on how to work with these classes is appropriate for students of all ages and abilities. It is important for teachers to create a relaxed, positive atmosphere in the classroom. Baker supports this theory, and he also claims that there is a strong connection between a good classroom atmosphere and having good behavior management. This will create a good learning situation². In order to create a good environment, it is vital for the teacher to form a good relationship between him/herself and the students. Examples of how to do that are to learn the students’ names as quickly as possible, as well as learn about their lives, what they like/do not like, interests and difficulties. This should be started as early as possible in a new course, for example by writing a letter to the students and asking them to

¹ Ainslie, Susan. (1994). *Mixed Ability Teaching: Meeting Learners.needs. Network 3: Teaching Language to Adults*. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research.

² Baker, Joanna. (2000). *The English language teacher’s handbook: how to teach large classes with few resources*. New York: Continuum; London: Cassel.

write back about themselves. This makes the students feel looked upon as individuals and promotes a good relationship.

According to Hess, it is important for the teacher not to rely too much on correctness but to focus on communicative competence and create motivating situations with a calm and welcoming environment where the students know that it is normal to make mistakes as it is a part of the learning process³. This can lead to less anxiety among the students. It is also important to set certain rules with the students about how to behave in order not to interfere with a good learning situation. A teacher should discuss proper rules for a good learning situation with the students and why the class needs to have them. Clear organization is vital in order to create a good atmosphere. A teacher should not just explain what they are going to do each lesson but also why it is important, what they are going to learn and how they are going to work, for example pair work, individual and so on. The teacher should begin each lesson by giving clear instructions to the whole class and end by addressing the whole class to get routines, both daily but also weekly. These routines create a sense of stability and structure which is helpful to many weaker students. For a teacher, assessment is very important, not just after each unit but on a day to day level. This is important because it helps to see how the lesson went and how it can be improved next time by better instructions, group work etc.

In Developing the student's responsibility for learning, it is important to let the students be part of assessment by letting them discuss in small groups with the teacher for example how an assignment went, what could have been improved and so on. Journal writing, whole class discussion or individual written assessments given to the teacher can also be good ways for the students to give the teacher helpful ideas on how to improve different aspects of teaching.

Brown and Supple both stress the importance of helping the students to learn different learning strategies so the students can develop their own study skills that work for them, since all students have their own ways of learning⁴. It can be very helpful to allow the students to create their own study guides for a test and so on.

A teacher should also promote cooperation and collaboration, according to Bowman. She further argue that teachers should encourage the students to help each other out, to ask classmates for help and give each other feedback on their work because this improves the students. ability to take responsibility for their learning.

Teaching, of course, ultimately depends on the willingness of the student to learn: unless the learner takes some responsibility in the shape of active cooperation and effort, there will be no learning in spite of the efforts of excellent teacher.

It can be very useful for the weaker students to be provided with self-assess material so the student can follow his/her progress and evaluate how it goes. This material needs to have clear instructions on what the student needs to do and also provide some questions for the student to reflect over when a task has been completed. Helping the students plan their work and develop study skills is a good way to increase the students. responsibility for their own learning, which should be the goal for the teacher to attain. Letting the students gradually develop responsibility builds up their self-esteem, and in this process it is important for the teacher to give encouragement and positive feedback.

One of the most important ways to deal with mixed-ability classes is to always give clear information and instructions and to present it in easy, manageable ways. This contributes to making the students

³ Hess, Natalie *Multilevel Classes*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

⁴ Bowman, Brenda. (1992). *Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Large Clevedon: Multilingual Matters*.

feel it is more meaningful and interesting. A teacher should introduce tasks clearly by using different methods. The teacher should give the students the information in the whole class, and showing an overhead or writing on the board. When explaining something to the students it is very useful to show concrete examples and illustrations. Using several methods to inform the students reinforces their understanding. After they have been given clear instructions it is advisable to give them time to think and discuss with their workmate and then ask questions. It is important to plan bigger tasks in manageable steps because if the task is not clearly presented to the students, and they are uncertain about how to go on with the task, it can create a problematic situation. Some of the students may feel it is too hard for them, and some may even give up.

Teachers insistence on attending to students. experiences, interests, and prior knowledge was once thought to result from a disregard for scientific methods. Now, however, these considerations are supported by cognitive research demonstrating that learning is a process of making meaning out of new or unfamiliar events in light of familiar ideas or experiences. To use activities that are student-centered is one of the solutions to dealing with mixed-ability teaching, according to Berry and Williams⁵. The content needs to be relevant for the students, and it needs to be linked to the tasks. This can be done by letting them express their own ideas and describe their own experiences when talking and writing. The teacher should connect what has been worked with to their experiences by asking them to put themselves in the situation they read about, heard or watched. This gives meaning to the task because it concerns the students more directly. Differentiation is needed in three areas of teaching: the material, the process and the product. The material can be differentiated by using articles, short stories, films, radio programs, plays, songs, poems etc. The process means how the students work with the material and can be differentiated by using whole class discussions, pair work, group work, individual work etc. The product includes the way the student shows what they have learned, for example through a test or different kinds of presentations etc.

As has been previously stated, there are several aspects a teacher needs to think about when working in a mixed-ability class. Students are very resourceful. They can create problems or generate solutions, depending on how you engage and maintain their attention. Therefore, it is very important how the teacher acts toward his/her students and what atmosphere is promoted.

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