

Teaching English in Various Ability Classes

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Abstract

In the given article the problem of teaching English at mixed classes and its solution is studied. There are a great variety of classroom activities by means of which they can overcome difficulties of mixed ability classes. In our days every student requires an individual approach according to the abilities shown. One should get an extra task so as not to be bored, another barely manages to follow the lesson, yet another needs a lesser task and some extra attention.

Key words: mixed ability classes, discussions, problem-solving tasks, personality, student's nomination, extra work, weaker students, stronger students, extra attention.

Introduction. It is very difficult to teach a class with clearly different levels of language competency. They may have different starting levels of English or they may learn at very different speeds. Presently, the English language teachers throughout the world keep on buzzing a word that their students are in mixed level. In the past teachers may well have said that the problem was just that some students were cleverer or simply 'better' than others in the class. But we now understand that the situation is more complex than that.

The main part. Our students are indeed mixed in many ways. They are different in terms of their levels of: Attention, Interest, Motivation, Learning styles, Types of intelligences, Physiological needs, Speed, Maturity, World knowledge.

The above said attributes are the causes for mixed ability classrooms. The characteristics of mixed ability classes are:

- While some students follow the lesson and are able to answer questions and do well in tests, others fall behind, don't seem to understand and do badly in tests.
- While some students pay attention and are cooperative, others 'misbehave' and seem disinterested.
- Teachers feel concerned that they are not challenging the high-achievers enough and at the same time are not giving enough help to those who are not doing as well.
- Teachers find it hard to 'pitch' their lessons at a level where all students can be engaged.

It is important to make a clear distinction between mixed ability teaching and mixed ability classes. Most teachers have to teach mixed ability groups but they may not be using mixed ability teaching strategies.

According to the new conception of teaching foreign languages at schools of our country the whole approach has been changed. The new approach takes into consideration the fact that the learners in a definite class are most likely to have different levels of language knowledge and communicative skills.

Every student has the right to be involved in the classroom activities irrespective of his or her personal capabilities.

On the one hand, we don't have the right to neglect the pupils with little capabilities and, on the other hand, the lesson shouldn't be boring for the smart pupils.

Realizing the importance of setting different demands for the pupils of mixed abilities, new three level standards for listening, speaking, reading and writing have been worked out in our country lately.

Some strategies of work in classes of mixed abilities:

The first strategy involves creating or providing different tasks for different levels. For example, the teacher can use a number of comprehension questions for a text. The teacher may have two sets of questions - A and B. Perhaps all students have to complete set A, the stronger ones also have to complete set B, or they even have an extra reading text. This obviously increases the amount of lesson preparation. For example, the teacher gives the students the following text to read.

“CAN I HELP YOU MADAM?”

A woman in blue jeans stood at the window of an expensive shop. Though she hesitated for a moment, she finally went in and asked to see a dress that was in the window. The assistant who served her did not like the way she was dressed. Glancing at her scornfully, he told her that the dress was sold. The woman walked out of the shop angrily and decided to punish the assistant next day. She returned to the shop the following morning dressed in a fur coat, with a handbag in one hand and a long umbrella in the other. After seeking out the rude assistant she asked for the same dress. Not realizing who she was, the assistant was eager to serve her this time. With great difficulty, he climbed into the shop window to get the dress. As soon as she saw it, the woman said she didn't like it. She enjoyed herself making the assistant bring almost everything in the window before finally buying the dress she had first asked for.

After reading this text the stronger students have to do detailed dictionary work on the vocabulary of the text. With the stronger students spending 10 minutes working with dictionaries the teacher has time to monitor and help the weaker ones with the text. Then the teacher can go through the shared comprehension tasks for the class and perhaps the stronger students can make a presentation about the words they have researched.

Now I want to speak about the extra work and homework. It is straightforward to give different students different homework. The teacher should give weaker students homework which really consolidates the class work and should give the stronger students work that will widen their knowledge. When teaching mixed ability classes, the weaker students will be missing things during the lesson or failing to understand. And the teacher should use homework to address this.

When nominating, the teacher should:

1. Ask the question before she gives the name of the student. In this case everyone has to listen;
2. Consider how easy it is for the student to answer. If a weak student will struggle, perhaps she should ask a stronger student. If a weak student should be capable, then she should ask them;
3. Avoid making students seem foolish, and yet also avoid patronizing them by only asking super simple questions;
4. Nominate with variety. The teacher should be careful to avoid nominating the same selection of students.

Conclusion. In a mixed level class the teacher can have different expectations of the language that the different students produce. Sometimes it can push the stronger students if the teacher corrects them heavily although she should be sensitive about this.

Teachers mustn't neglect the pupils who are less capable than others. There are a great variety of classroom activities by means of which they can overcome the difficulty of mixed ability classes.

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