

TEACHING ENGLISH IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES

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We are often teaching a class that has students who are clearly of different levels. They may have different starting levels of English or they may learn at very different speeds – for any number of reasons.

AIM: to share the ideas and strategies that a teacher can use to deal with this situation.

MATERIALS and METHODS: the first step is *discussion* and *needs analysis*. It is easy for students to get frustrated in a class of mixed ability. Stronger students may feel held back, weaker students may feel pressured. The teacher may feel stressed. The best solution to it is to have an open class discussion about the classroom situation – to ensure the best for everyone it is better to acknowledge the situation and for everyone to agree how to deal with it. It is probably best to stage and structure the discussion. We use a needs analysis to prompt the students to reflect upon their learning style, learning strategies, language needs, learning enjoyment, motivation, language strengths and weaknesses. Questions that are included: 1) What kinds of class activities do you benefit from? 2) What language skill do you most wish to develop? 3) Do you prefer working individually or with a partner? 4) Would you rather sit and listen to the teacher all lesson or participate in group work? Students compare their answers in pairs or small groups. Then I collect the information and prepare a statistical representation of the key questions and answers. This will help to develop the sense of shared community in the class.

The next step is *explanation* the mixed level situation to the students giving them a list of possible approaches to the teaching and learning. In pairs the students rank the ideas according to their suitability for the situation. It seems useful to write a contract of behavior for activities, something like this: “I will help and support my activity partner”, “I will participate in group work”. If I think my students are not mature enough to carry out this kind of reflection, I’ll explain the situation to the class telling them what strategy is to be used. If students know what to expect, I hope they will cooperate. All of this work could be done in the mother tongue, although I feel it is best done primarily in English as it draws attention to the fact that this is a learning language issue. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to encourage students to develop an awareness of their own language abilities and learning needs. What are their strengths and weaknesses, and how can they focus on these? How can they measure their own progress? The students are suggested to keep a learner’s diary, regular self-assessment, keeping records of mistakes.

Varying the way students work in the class will help meet the variety of levels in the class. The example is “pair work” – the students are paired strong with strong, weak with weak, or strong with weak. It depends on the situation. I think, in a very controlled activity, the strong with weak will work well. In a freer activity, perhaps strong with strong will be of benefit. Variety in the pairings is the key here – and the teacher should also be sensitive to the general relationships between different students, and learn to note who works well with whom. As for the group work, the groups are of mixed levels or similar ones. The hope is that in a similar group the weaker student will feel more able to contribute. Also, if the group is working with a set of information, the information is divided between the students, forcing them to work together.

Another idea is “whole class-mingles”. This is a favored strategy of mine. A mingle activity involves students talking or interacting with many different members of the class in a short period of time in order to achieve a task. This means that any one student will work with students at different levels – experiencing stronger and weaker levels of communication. This supports the weaker students and provides opportunities for the stronger ones.

A classic activity is a “Find someone who ...”. In this activity the student has to survey the class to find people who... (for example)

- came to study at our medical institute from another region of the country (Did you come from Poltava?)
- have done something (Have you found out the meaning of the new Latin terms?)
- like something (Do you like Medical Biology?)

If a student answers “yes” to a question, then the other student should ask for more information. If a student answers “no”, then the other should find a new person to ask, and may come back to the first student with another question later on. The potential for this is endless. It is a great way to provide practice of a particular language structure, for example, 10 questions all using the past simple and provides controlled practice as well as the opportunity for further freer discussion. It also creates a lively classroom dynamic. Mingles can take many forms – students are suggested to find the person who has a matching word to theirs, or the second half of a split sentence. The students may all have the same or different questions, or a mixture. The key is the general principle of an information gap or communicative need.

CONCLUSION: overall, variety in the types of working groups, and an open discussion of the class situation will help to deal with some of the difficulties that are present in mixed ability classes of students. The aim of these strategies is to create a positive working environment, which is all part of ensuring better learning.