Efficient Second Language Learning in Mixed Ability Classes

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Abstract

The term, *Mixed ability* or *heterogeneous* classes, is used to describe the class which comprises of students with different levels of understanding. It's a well-known fact that any two learners having exactly the same learning needs is not possible. All the classes are to some extent made up of learners who differ in many ways- strengths, weaknesses and approaches to learning. They may respond differently to various teaching methods and classroom situations. In order to be accessible to meet individual needs within a class, teachers have to find ways to meet them in the same frequency in the aspects of teaching. To achieve this, they have to find ways of managing the classroom (learners, resources, tasks, relationships, responsibilities, etc.) that create opportunities for working closely with individuals or small groups of learners. In this article, we focus on mixed ability factors, the problems with and advantages of teaching mixed ability classes as well as strategies for teachers who are managing mixed ability classes.

Key words: mixed ability, heterogeneous, advantages and disadvantages of mixed ability classes.

Introduction

In the present scenario, managing mixed ability classes is a very common problem. Most language classes contain students of mixed abilities. This happens for a number of reasons- mainly because of learning styles, different learning speeds, variations in motivation and often as a result of logistic decisions. The teacher has to tackle the problem of how to meet the needs of everyone in the class. Naturally, this is not easy to solve and it would be wrong to suggest that there are any simple solutions. In this paper, we would like to come out with some information about mixed ability English language classes and some activities which would help to come out with best results.

An Overview

In these classes, it's important to remember that all students will get something out of the class, but not necessarily the same things, and not necessarily what you aim to teach them! For

example, the beginners may begin to get a grasp of your classroom language whilst the stronger students may begin to be able to put a new tense into use.

A fundamental step to rectify this phenomenon starts from the class room itself. It should be discussed inside the classroom and it should be handled as a normal situation that the class as a whole has to deal with. This is probably best done in the mother tongue of the students. Most of the solutions to the problem depend on cooperation among the members of the class. So, it is essential to stress the need for teamwork and use English whenever possible in classroom communication.

Issues with Mixed Ability Classes

It is well known that every student has a different way of learning and learns and progresses at different speeds. Thus, while some students may find the learning task easy to complete, others may find it difficult to understand. Learning also depends on what students have brought with them into class. Since each student comes from a different family, a different environment and/or a different nation, the multi-cultural population of the classroom may be an obstacle for the teachers in reaching the students, which eventually results in ineffective learning. Moreover, although it is quite difficult for the teacher to know about each student and to follow what each one does during the lessons even in small classes, it is important for teachers to monitor each and every student and to reach their needs in a variety of ways to achieve effective teaching.

Since most language textbooks are designed for an ideal homogeneous classroom environment, teachers must understand that students react to the textbook differently due their individual differences. Some students may find the textbook tedious and difficult, whereas some students may find it engaging and simple to read. In addition, as language teaching course materials are currently based on content-based or theme-based syllabi, some students may find the topics dull, strange, or meaningless; whereas others find it enjoyable, familiar or interesting. Therefore, it is usually necessary for the teacher to evaluate and adapt the materials according to his/her class.

Since the classroom is the first and only environment for many foreign language learners, they should use this chance as much as possible. However, some of the students find it difficult to speak in the target language for many reasons ranging from interest to confidence, from age to knowledge. Other students, however, would like to express everything they think or feel by using the new language. As a result, some students may take turns, while others do not speak for the entire lesson.

Interest problems may arise due to the differences among students in terms of their attitude towards the subject matter and/or the teacher; their knowledge of language; and their personality. For instance, some students may find lessons boring, as the topic has no familiarity with their own life or their interests. Furthermore, some of the students may not be interested in the lesson, unless they do get the chance to express their own ideas since the teacher talks too much during the lesson or the other students take many turns. Hence, teachers should be aware of the different interests of the students to organize and to arrange activities accordingly.

Often the advanced students finish the tasks given before other students. As a result, they may misbehave while waiting for the others to finish. The weaker students, on the other hand, cannot finish the tasks as quickly as the strong ones and may lose their confidence and/or show ill-disciplined behaviour for a variety of reasons related. Consequently, mixed abilities may result in classroom management problems.

Benefits of Mixed Ability Classes

In a whole class approach, mixed ability classes allow the opportunity to accept, discuss and listen to others' diverse perspectives. Mixed classes are useful for topic introduction, general direction, read-aloud, closure and team building.

With mixed readiness classes, advanced students can experience the satisfaction of helping less-able learners and modelling more complex ideas. This practice may build confidence in the advanced students as tasks require simpler skills.

Similar readiness work in small groups can assist in matching pace with students. Above grade-level materials can be used so in-depth content is developed. Advanced students can challenge each other in a comfortable environment as they share their expertise. This group work incorporates more abstract or complex ideas to expand the student's knowledge further.

Individual work in ability classes allows for appropriate pace and level. Individual interests and ideas can be pursued and a greater diversity of responses can be achieved.

Classroom Management with Mixed Ability Groups
Setting Goals

It is important to share the goal of each lesson with students. This could be written on the board beside the date. It lets students know why they are there and what they are working towards. It

is a good idea to remind students about their goal during the lesson so that they can take note of their progress. At the end of the lesson students should be asked to check if they have achieved this goal. The goals can be different for each student, depending on their level, but realising the goals will give the same sense of achievement to all. Students could test each other then the teacher could ask for thumbs up from all the students who feel they have achieved something in the lesson.

Grouping

It may seem contradictory to suggest that you group stronger students together and also suggest that you group weak with strong. However, depending on the task and the class dynamics we think there are usually opportunities for both types of grouping. It's a good idea to experiment with mixing up the strong and weak students whilst also giving time for stronger students to work together so they work to their full potential.

Giving Instructions

Giving clear instructions is vital for weaker students to be able to follow the class. Use hand gestures as well as words to explain the tasks and use stronger students to check back the instructions and even explain the task in their own language if necessary.

Error correction

Stronger students can probably stand more correction. Don't over correct weak students as it will affect their confidence. Encourage students to correct one another and demand a higher level of accuracy from the stronger students.

Interaction with individuals and groups

We have to interact with students by sharing with learners some of the responsibility for lesson planning and learning and helping learners to develop and use independent, collaborative and problem-solving skills. We have to organise tasks and activities in ways that are compatible with the partnership approach , developing and organising resources in ways that facilitate the partnership approach .

Regular feedback must be collected from the learners.

Making Changes

Teachers are understandably afraid of 'throwing out the baby with the bathwater'. How can you know if any change you make is going to work any better than what you were doing before? Here are some ways of reducing the risk:

Take small steps - Take one step at a time, and prepare the students well. So that they are not upset by unexpected changes to usual practice.

Add breadth and enrichment - Maintain the existing regime for the time being. But experiment with additions and alterations to one or two activities with a view to widening their sensory scope.

Offer choices - Begin to offer choices, allowing students to choose whichever way seems to work best for them. Again, this begins to involve students in thinking about learning and encourages them to take on some of the responsibility.

Start with one unit - Pick out for your experiment a theme or unit of work which seems to be particularly difficult to teach successfully. If it works, you know that success is due to the change in approach, and that will give you the confidence to experiment further.

Conclusion

Every class can be described as a mixed ability class as it is made up of learners who are different in terms of their knowledge and ability. This article aimed to outline mixed ability factors and the advantages and problems associated with teaching mixed ability classes. Studies have shown that teachers who view their learners' differences in a positive way and embrace strategies for teaching mixed ability classes are better equipped to teach in mixed ability classroom contexts. Teachers often lack sufficient knowledge of strategies to use in the classroom to cater for a wide range of ability. Setting reduces the range of ability in the class but does not remove the fact that all students have individual needs and learning preferences. More staff training is needed to inform teachers about catering for the different learning styles. Using apt methods can help teachers provide challenging differentiated work and reap the social and academic benefits. Students need to be taught how to take responsibility for their own learning.

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