

TEACHING LANGUAGES IN MIXED ABILITY GROUPS: PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES



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Abstract. This article covers mixed ability factors with the help of real condition samples, the problems with and advantages of teaching mixed ability classes as well as strategies for teachers who teach mixed ability classes. Additionally, it analyzes researchers' investigations on problems of mixed ability classes.

Key words: mixed ability groups, study skills, learning strategies, assessment, correction, feedback, heterogeneous groups, learning techniques.

Teaching foreign languages are getting more straightforward with some innovative methods day by day. New strategies and techniques are suggested by methodologists in order to increase a quality of teaching languages. Nowadays, teachers are not trying to use those “traditional” methods in their classes instead they are trying to diversify each class with modern elements of teaching. But there is another side of the coin, not all methods or strategies can be helpful in some classes, to be more specific, classes which comprise the different levels or different abilities. The situation is quite controversial when syllabus of the class requires students to be at the same level, but in practice, it is vice versa. The teacher prepares teaching materials on one exactly topic for the whole group no matter the group consists of different leveled students. While using these materials, students can feel frustrated and lose self-confidence. It can necessitate analyzing whether all students acquire new knowledge during one class or not? This is the issue that this article is going to be devoted and some possible solutions found.

Penny Ur (1991;303) listed following challenges that can be faced by language teachers during teaching in mixed ability classes:

1. Different interests of different learners. This is right, not all students can be attracted to the class because of their interests. Sometimes the level of complexity of the tasks can cause decreasing of learners' interest.
2. Usually, teaching materials are strictly designed on certain levels. Not in all cases, but still many teachers don't comprise all learning styles in their materials.

3. Teachers don't manage to observe each student individually, not because they don't want it, but the time of the class strictly limited. As a result, those students with lower abilities may be skipped without feedback.
4. Activeness of advanced learners during classes make inconvenient situation with lower leveled students. Teachers naturally focus on the active students rather than passive ones.
5. Assessment – as we know assessment includes two main aspects: correction and feedback. Teachers can feel overwhelmed by the marking load and may also feel confident for correcting individual mistakes or errors. At the same time giving feedback to each student requires time and desire.
6. Teachers may consider their mixed ability classes in a muddle or a bit challenging to control rather than regular classes. Discipline problems occur when learners feel frustrated, lose concentration, get bored or behave in a disruptive manner. Some reasons why mixed ability classes may be more difficult to control may be because different learners may find the subject matter easier or more difficult to grasp, weaker learners may require more assistance from the teacher, or more advanced learners may dominate aspects of the lessons [1].

It follows that a great attention can be paid to the understanding of “weak” and “strong” students. We know the fact that every person has their key abilities to do something. Some people are good at understanding of any topic, others may have skills to analyze newly acquired knowledge before using or practicing it and there is another group of people who have a slower mechanism to comprehend everything which is presented in one class and they need time to use it. So, in this case, instructors realize that those “weaker” students should work in pairs together with “stronger” students. But sometimes the real context shows the dissimilar result. In practice, stronger students don't want to assist weaker ones because they may think that it is time-consuming. Not because they are egoistic, but they are automatic learners whose brains always need to acquire something new and utilize on time. Probably it is time to end up traditional thinking and discover some new strategies to work with mixed ability groups.

Based on this question some sources suggest quite beneficial techniques in order to increase the effectiveness of language acquisition in heterogeneous groups. The first thing to take into consideration is teaching materials. Those students with required level can adapt them without much effort. Conversely, weaker students might have obstacles to be involved in the class. Under these circumstances, language teachers from different countries put forward to utilize pre-teaching vocabulary before each class. Which means before starting new class students may have access to receive materials and learn some new words or phrases on it until the class start.

This strategy gives teachers and students additional possibility to concentrate on an essential parts of the class.

Furthermore, usage of needs analysis may assist teachers to encounter their students' abilities, styles, needs and even identifies their strengths and weaknesses in language acquisition. In most cases, teachers avoid analyzing students' needs may be for one simple reason – time. Because the organization of needs analysis may require time, especially for making questionnaires or interviews. But practice assures that needs analysis could be the most essential tool in order to understand students wants in mixed ability groups. Particularly, it helps teachers to provide effective class without wasting much time for correction or individual explanation.

To sum up, using strategies in mixed ability classes helps the class to have a positive and cooperative atmosphere, where different leveled students can work together and achieve effective results. Obviously, a teacher is a key feature that can lead students with appropriate teaching methods, diversifies each class with different helpful strategies and techniques for learning and of course is the main motivator and supporter of students in any levels.

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