

## SOME THOUGHTS ON TEACHING MIXED ABILITY CLASSES

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**Abstract.** The article discusses that using new methods and style teaching process of mixed ability classes, investigate lessons in mixed ability classes, create new ways or techniques in order to improve the quality of teaching process and help learners make their learning ability equal.

**Key words:** mixed ability classes, techniques, language classes, learning style, strategies, observation, critical study of scientific literature.

### INTRODUCTION

Mixed ability class is one of the most discussable, mysterious and unsolved problem among many scientists during several ages.

Baker argues that it is not just the fact that there are many students in a class, but that all of them are at so many different ability levels that provides the biggest challenge. She further claims that in mixed-ability classes it can be difficult to keep the attention of all students. Their motivation can be poor and the teacher can feel frustrated because he/she does not have enough time to help the weaker students. In addition to the above mentioned challenges students have their own way of learning, and the weaker ones probably have more difficulties working in a noisy atmosphere since they are usually more easily distracted. A mixed-ability class can seem uncooperative, the students can get bored easily and this can cause commotion in the classroom. Planning the lesson and making work-material can take too much time for the teacher and the planned material is often too easy or too difficult for the students. This may make the teacher feel inadequate and unable to cope with the class.

Tomlinson argues that grouping students into one “slow” and one “fast” separate class has been researched, and studies show that students do not improve enough to fit into a typical class, and that they stay remedial. There are both positive and negative sides to grouping students. One positive side is that the lesson can be easier to plan and manage in some ways since the teacher does not have such a wide range of abilities to deal with. On the other hand to separate the slow learners can do harm to their social and emotional difficulties because by being placed in a “slow class” they can think of themselves as different, difficult, inferior or other negative terms [32,314].

Dornyei stresses the importance of a positive attitude among the teachers who are to teach these weaker groups: This means, for example, that ability grouping is a dangerous practice because teachers who are to teach the low ability groups are bound to be influenced by this knowledge, which may send the children on an ever downward spiral of low achievement and low expectations [8, 70].

According to Leiding the students' own interests and experiences, their own ideas and emotions should be considered when planning lessons. Much research has been done on the importance of taking advantage of these aspects: 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-centred is one of the solutions to dealing with mixed-ability teaching, according to Berry and Williams. 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.

Hess stresses the importance of students sharing their opinions and relating to their own experiences but also the need for them to share their future plans. Hess argues that it is important to incorporate open-ended questions, which relate to what each student thinks about a specific situation, event and so on. Dörnyei claims that it is vital for the teacher to show his/her own positive attitude and enthusiasm for what they teach: "...enthusiasm for one's specialization area and the ability to make this enthusiasm public rather than hiding it is one of the most important ingredients of motivationally successful teaching" [28, 207].

Green mentions the use of computer tasks to increase motivation, for example programs where students can practice grammar, vocabulary but also using a computer to write letters, emails and finding information, and other exercises. Much has been written about its potential for motivating pupils, especially the less able.

According to Goldstein, asking questions before the reading and by using titles, pictures and so on to get the students to discuss what they think a text is about, encourages students when they are going to work with it. This method improves their understanding, and it gets the students engaged in thinking about reading.

Ainslie also agree with the view that differentiation is important in mixed-ability classes. One key to a good differentiated classroom is occasionally include the students in the choice of their topics and the media to work with. As has been previously stated, there are several aspects a teacher needs to think about when working in a mixed-ability class.

Bowman states: "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. All children are born with potential and we cannot be sure of the learning limits of any child. As schools prepare to introduce a Curriculum for Excellence by August 2008 attention has once more turned to the long-standing debate on whether setting pupils in the junior secondary or leaving them in mixed ability classes is the best way to achieve effective teaching and learning. Those in favor of setting stress the improvement in pupil achievement whereas those in favor of mixed ability groupings emphasize the importance of the social consequences.

How can teachers raise attainment while helping pupils to be effective learners?

Grouping pupils according to their ability would seem a logical way to allow all pupils to achieve their potential. However, it makes very transparent the differences in the academic ability of pupils and is therefore not a very inclusive approach. Setting can lead to stigmatization, low self-esteem and disruptive behavior in pupils in lower sets. A mixed ability class allows for more of a social mix but relies heavily on the expertise of the teacher in helping a wide range of pupils achieve their potential. There is the danger that the more able might not be stretched enough while the less able are neglected. The aim of this research is to suggest strategies for teaching mixed ability classes within the framework for a Curriculum for Excellence. 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.

MacKeown believes that many teachers see a mixed ability class as consisting of a group of average and able children with a subsection of children who have learning problems. Ireson and Hallam suggest teachers need to recognize that a class is mixed ability because children have different strengths and weaknesses and develop at different rates. They have different preferences for learning and displaying their work[.23,269].

As Bremner mixed ability class does not just consist of a range of abilities but also a range of learning styles and preferences. All pupils will show strengths at different times depending on the topic being studied and the learning style being used. When pupils are working out with their preferred learning style then they will not perform as well. All classes even those that have been set are mixed ability to a certain degree.

Harris and Snow express their concern that the drive to raise achievement may have left Modern Languages teachers feeling they should be drawing yet more colorful flashcards or making up differentiated worksheets. They suggest that an alternative approach would be to focus on helping pupils to become more effective learners. They recommend giving pupils more ownership not only in the choice of content but also how they go about learning.

In February 2007 HMIE produced a publication entitled “Modern Languages – A Portrait of Current Practice in Scottish Schools”. It outlined good and bad practices within the 16 secondary schools visited by inspectors. Lessons that were considered to be poor were too teacher-led with interactions only through the teacher. In these classes teachers did not explain the purpose of activities to learners, relied too heavily on the textbook and there was no choice of activities. There was not enough collaboration in groups and insufficient differentiated tasks on offer. The report also gave examples of schools doing good work within the framework of a Curriculum for Excellence. In these schools teachers used a variety of teaching methods and shared the purposes of lessons and activities with learners. Pupils were given interesting and challenging tasks to complete co-operatively in groups. Teaching a mixed ability class will work if all pupils are allowed to experience success and to learn as individuals. It is less likely to be successful if teachers insist on whole class teaching and teaching to the average child. It is unrealistic to expect any group of pupils whatever the ability to work through

a body of work at exactly the same pace. Two thirds of pupils will be working out of their learning style unless the type of task is varied[20, 36].

Mixed ability classes are a fact of not only language classes but of all courses. Since no two students can be the same in terms of language background, learning speed, learning ability and motivation, it is a utopian view to think that our classes could be homogeneous in terms of these aspects; no matter where we live in the world or at which school we teach. Therefore, the language teachers should be aware of the problems of mixed ability classes and their solutions to identify the source of troubles in their classes and to cure them.

In the middle of 1930's, some schools in the United Kingdom decided to divide students according to their IQ tests. However, it was seen that the new groups still had variations among students, and it is not feasible to change these groups and the curricula every time. Furthermore, Prodrumou designates that even when students are grouped according to their test scores, their progress rates will always be at different levels due to the teaching methods, materials and/or learning style differences. The teachers become the key factor in reaching each student in a class. It is important for teachers to be aware of the problems resulting from mixed abilities in their classes and to decide on techniques and strategies that could be used to solve such problems.

The differences which cause problems in such classes are in language learning ability, language knowledge, cultural background, learning style, attitude towards language, mother tongue, intelligence, world knowledge, learning experience, knowledge of other languages, age, gender, personality, confidence, motivation, interests, and/or educational level. However, these variations may occur in different degrees in different classes. Thus, if the teacher wants to ensure that all students perform to their maximum potential, the teacher must identify these problems and deal with them accordingly.

### **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, the theory of mixed ability classes and some thoughts about them. In all periods, this is one of the most debatable problem to teach these kinds of classes. Various teachers, philologists and scientists gave their different opinions and ideas for solving this problem.

Firstly, they found out what is mixed ability class.

Secondly, scientists tried to create positive atmosphere for pupils and for teachers in order to make their job easier and more effective.

Teachers may face a number of problems when teaching in mixed ability environments. These are some comments made by teachers about their experiences of teaching mixed ability classes:

- The stronger students get bored if the teacher spends time for explaining to the weaker ones.
- There is a syllabus to get through, but most of the students are already behind.
- Half the students have finished an exercise, when the other half have only just begun.
- The stronger students dominate.
- The weaker students do not even try.
- The teachers do not know where to pitch their lesson.

- Weaker students always ask to explain the things in their own language.
- Stronger students do not want to work with the weaker ones.

The first task of the educators is to find out their learners' ability, interest, and age and motivation then work with their pupils according to identified facts.

Shortly, every teacher marks this problem differently and solve it by their own way.

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### **Internet resources**

7. [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)
8. [www.ask.com](http://www.ask.com)