# METHODOLOGY: TEACHING MIXED ABILITY CLASSES

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**Annotation**

*Mixed ability teaching is related to working with students who have different personalities, skills, interests and learning needs. Though most classes are usually multi-level, teachers (especially those with little or no experience), find teaching such classes a very difficult and demanding task as it involves planning lessons which include a rich diversity of tasks corresponding to a variety of learning styles and abilities. 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.*

Howard Gardener's Theory of Multiple Intelligences tells us that we all may learn in different ways and we also have natural preferences to the way in which we enjoy learning. If we only teach in one way many students will be disadvantaged. They will find it difficult to engage in the lesson and may switch off. They are not less able than others, they just need a different kind of stimulation.

Mixed ability level teaching is related to working together with students who have different personalities, skills, interests and learning needs. Though most classes are usually multi-level, teachers (especially those with little or no experience), find teaching such classes a very difficult and demanding task as it involves planning lessons which include a rich diversity of tasks corresponding to a variety of learning styles and abilities.

The adoption of a flexible methodology is considered a challenge by some teachers as they have to put more effort when designing their lessons, they might need to learn new organizational and / or classroom management skills – and that may be something beyond their pedagogical skills.

However, teaching a non-homogeneous group of pupils can be viewed positively because it serves as a trigger for teachers' professional growth and development as it involves the usage of variety of approaches, teaching techniques, interaction patterns, and tasks.

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.

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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 (Kelly 1979). Furthermore, Prodromou (1989, 2) indicates 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 and every 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.

## Some Problems in the Mixed Ability Classes

### Effective Learning

As a teacher, our aim is to reach all of our students. However, 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 very easy to deal with, others may find it difficult to understand. Besides, learning also depends on what students have brought with them into class. Since each 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.

### Materials

Since most language textbooks are designed for an ideal classroom environment, teachers always have to deal with the problem that students react to the textbook differently due their individual differences. First of all, some students may find the textbook boring and very hard, whereas some find it interesting or very easy. 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 her class.

### Participation

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 many turns, while others do not speak for the entire lesson.

### Interests

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. Teachers should be aware of the different interests of the students to organize and to arrange activities accordingly.

**Discipline**

Often the quicker students finish the tasks given before the 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 to that. Consequently, mixed abilities may result in classroom management problems.

### How to Cope with the Problems

1. In order to solve the problems of mixed ability, teaching should *appeal to all senses*, all learning styles and all intelligences. Moreover, it should be based on a meaningful context for all learners. To exemplify, visuals are always useful for all age and proficiency levels, so even using coloured chalk or board markers attracts learners' attention to the teaching point. Hence, teachers can make use of visuals to grab students' attention and to motivate them because even the most passive learners are often interested in realia and/or colourful and interesting posters.

2. It is advisable to have *plans* for the early finishers in case they finish the tasks earlier. This contingency plan might be an extra exercise, a handout or a reading passage. Recently, some of the textbooks have been prepared considering the mixed ability classes and include extra activities in teacher's books.

3. All students do not need to carry out an entire *in-class activity*. While every student should do certain parts, only some of the students (weak ones or early finishers) do all of it (Ur 1996, 306). In relation to that, the tests could include optional questions: While every student completes some parts of the test, some other parts may have options from which the students choose. Furthermore, different tasks can be given to different learners according to their language progress or interest, or optional tasks can be prepared from which students choose.

4. *Open-ended tasks* or questions (such as writing a letter, an ending of a story/book/film, or a response to a picture) have a variety of possible correct answers instead of a single answer. These tasks allow each learner to perform at his/her own level. Some of the students may be good at understanding but might be weak in expressing themselves orally or in written work; thus, open-ended tasks give them the chance to express themselves without trying to find the one and the only correct answer.

5. It is important for teachers to give students the opportunity to express their ideas, feelings and experiences, though they may lack confidence or enough language knowledge. By *personalizing the tasks,* all students can participate voluntarily. Knowing students' personalities helps the teacher to prepare and adapt materials easily in order to make them interesting or relevant to students, which adds variety to the classroom environment and establishes a positive atmosphere.

6. Students love *games, competitions and dramatization*, so these are ways of ensuring their interest in the lesson. Regardless of the differences among the students in terms of language level and learning styles, they are motivated to use the target language while they are playing a game or participating in a completion or a role-play.

7. *Group/pair-work activities* are useful not only for the teacher to observe students but also for the students to cooperate and to learn from each other. When a strong student works with weaker students, the student can be a source of knowledge in the group. The teacher, on the other hand, may form groups of weaker and stronger students separated from each other, and she can give different tasks to

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these groups. So the stronger and quicker students work with more complicated tasks, whereas the weaker students deal with a simpler task or work with the teacher as a group member.

8. *Extra homework* always helps teachers of mixed ability classes. However, considering the level and the interests of the students, extra work should be of something that the students would enjoy doing. Therefore, a good way of dealing with mixed ability may be individual and team projects. In addition, students would be more enthusiastic to work in such projects if they can choose their topic such as preparing a poster on their favourite extreme sports like parachuting.

9. *Portfolios* are another efficient way of dealing with mixed ability groups. Teachers may ask students to keep all the things they have done during the term including the extra work depending on their ability or needs. As a result, not only the teacher but also each student has a record of his/her progress during the term. This record also shows the needs of the student for further progress.

## Possible Problems:

### 1) Possible problem
A teacher might have difficulties finding appropriate teaching materials and resources that fit the needs, learning styles, individual language level and interests of all pupils.
**Possible solutions**
a. Adapt some of the materials (e.g. make language simple); b. Design your own teaching materials; c. Support the teaching materials with visual stimuli (e.g. photos, pictures, etc.)

### 2) Possible problem
Weaker pupils find the tasks for homework from the course book difficult and often come without homework
**Possible solution**
a. Create easier and more challenging versions of the same homework task. Slower learners can't participate because the tasks are too difficult for them. b. Help visual learners by using visual clues; c. Vary the level of tasks (e.g. reduce the number of choices or delete the more difficult choices in multiple-level exercises); d. Include open-ended tasks which help learners work at their own pace; e. Encourage learner collaboration (pupils work alone and then in pairs or groups and share and complete what they couldn't do); f. Grade tasks

### 3) Possible problem
The teacher does not know his / her pupils' interests and needs.
 Some pupils may find the lesson boring because the topic is not familiar to their own life or interests, while others are challenged and interested.
The teacher does not know what the strengths of each learner are
**Possible solution** a. Try to get to know your learners, their language level and interests; b. Make sure every child has participated in some way in the lesson. Organize more pair and group work activities which involve more children at the same time; c. Try to find every single learner's strength by offering a variety of activities

### 4) Possible problem
Some pupils are interested in the lesson and participate actively, while others are unwilling and reluctant to take part in the lesson activities
**Possible solution**: a. Plan and use a variety of activities that suit different 'intelligences'; b. Think of pupils in a positive way - try to find the strengths and preferred learning style of everyone

### 5) Possible problem
Extrovert pupils tend to occupy the teacher's attention while shy learners are suppressed
**Possible solution:** a. Involve shy learners; b. Mix the participants in the groups

**6 ) Possible problem**
Weaker pupils have problems copying with the different tasks while bright pupils finish earlier
**Possible solution**   a. Weak pupils need encouragement and support from the teacher; b. Reduce the difficulty of tasks
**7) Possible problem**
Learners who complete tasks quickly get impatient when they have to wait for other to do the same or answer the teacher's questions
**Possible solutions**  **a.** Help pupils learn to respect diversity in terms of skills and abilities; **b.** Prepare additional activities for quick those pupils who finish earlier; **c.** Delegate some remedial work to fast learners by asking them to repeat an explanation, write the new words on the board, share their personal opinion on a task, etc.

 The suggested solutions do not exhaust the list of possible approaches to solving the  problems. They just offer an initial idea of how to cope with the challenges of working with multi-level classes. In fact the  given techniques can be summarized in the following way :

1.  *Encourage cooperation and respect amongst your pupils.*
2.  *Accept all their contributions as valid and valuable.*
3.  *Use visuals open to interpretation at various levels.*
4.  *Involve the whole class in the checking phase.*
5.  *Use pupils' non-linguistic skills (e.g. their knowledge of other subjects or their ability to draw or mimic).*
6.  *Grade your worksheets, making them usable by pupils at different level.*
7.  *Use drama techniques*
8.  *Make the most of group and pair work.*
9.  *Treat your pupils as people with a past and future.*
10. *Treat your pupils as people who think.*
11. *Treat your pupils as people who feel.*
12. *Have a store of supplementary tricks, such as games, jokes, puzzles, stories, etc. to deal with early finishers.*

The teachers they should try to make their language classroom inclusive for all learners. The faster the trainees realize that:
• *pupils learn from each other and not only from the teacher;*
• *pupils learn at a different pace;*
• *slow learning can sometimes lead to solid knowledge;*
• *children's interests and motivation tend to change easily; the better*

**One more way of solving mixed-ability problems: discussion and needs analysis**
It is probably best to stage and structure the discussion.

### Needs Analysis

 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 might be included are...
• What kinds of class activities do you enjoy / benefit from?
• Which language skill do you most wish to develop?
• Do you prefer working individually or with a partner?
• 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. You should 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.

### Explain and discuss

Explain the mixed-level situation to the students and give a list of possible approaches to the teaching and learning. In pairs, the students rank the approaches/ideas according to their suitability for the situation.

Following feedback, you should highlight the strategies you plan to use.

All of the above work could be done in the mother tongue, although I feel it is best done primarily in the target language (as it draws attention to the fact that this is a learning language issue.

### Extension activities for stronger students

*Reading*

Ask early finishers to write new vocabulary up on the board with definitions.

Rewrite a part of the text in a different tense / person.

Write their personal opinion / a short summary of the text. Write questions about the text.

*Listening*

Give out the tape script and nominate a 'vocabulary master' to look up tricky words or expressions in a dictionary to then explain to the group.

Focus on the accents or intonation of the speakers and get students to copy chunks. If it's a true/false activity, follow on by asking 'why/why not?)

*Writing*

Give creative tasks that students can do at their own level.

Indicate mistakes using correction code to give students a chance to self-correct. (Sp = spelling, Gr = grammar etc.)

Increase the word limit.

Indicate where they could use more interesting ways of saying something.

*Speaking*

Ask students to justify / defend their opinions.

Ban easy words like 'nice' to push their vocabulary to a higher level.

Get students to record themselves and self-correct.

Pair students of higher level together so they really go for it.

### Support for weaker students

*Reading*

Pre-teach difficult vocabulary and leave it written on the board for students to refer to. Use visuals if possible.

If there are gaps, give students the answers in a jumbled order, with a few extras.

Draw attention to the title, pictures etc and set the scene beforehand so their mind is on track for the topic. Break the text into chunks and give the option of only reading some of the text.

*Listening*

Pre-teach vocabulary, use visual prompts when appropriate.

Give students time to discuss answers before feeding back to the class.

Give students the tape script on second listening.

If it's a gap fill, supply the words with a few extras.

*Writing*

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Correct the draft together before students copy up in neat.
Reduce the word limit.
Encourage use of dictionaries / vocabulary books.
Give an example piece of writing as a model before they begin writing.

Pair or group weaker students with stronger students.
*Speaking*
Give students time to rehearse and gather their ideas before a role play or discussion.
Pair weak and strong together.
Let students make notes before the speaking activity begins. Allow for 'thinking time'.
Grade students on the effort they make rather than their ability.
With a whole class mingle like a class survey or a 'find somebody who...' practice the questions as a group                                                                                              beforehand.
Give weaker students more listening and thinking time before calling on them to answer questions.


**Let's take the example of a mixed level group and see the possible outline for the lesson:**
**Stage one**  The lesson starts with a warm-up activity consolidating the simple past, which all students have met previously.
**Stage two** The class then divides. The elementary and weaker intermediate students, who the teacher thinks need a full structured presentation, remain with the teacher while the stronger intermediate students work autonomously on a second simple past consolidation activity – maybe a short listening or reading activity.
**Stage Three** After the teacher has completed the presentation, the class comes back together and completes a receptive practice activity which asks them to distinguish between the two verb forms. This has the aim of checking whether all the students understand the use of the form. If the teacher finds that any of the higher level students in fact don't, s/he can ask the lower level students to explain. This a) checks that the students who heard the presentation really understand, and b) aids motivation: one of the problems of a mixed ability group is that it is always the same, weaker or lower level students who "don't know/can't do". This activity gives them the chance to be the ones who do know.
**Stage Four** The class then splits again. This stronger students go back to the computer (or other materials) and work on consolidation activities for the present perfect at their own level. These may be grammar practice activities, a listening consolidation, or whatever the teacher thinks the students need. Meanwhile the lower level students remain with the teacher for some controlled practice work.
**Stage Five** The groups then swap. The stronger students meet the teacher for some semi-controlled or freer practice, while the weaker ones work autonomously at their own level – which may or may not mean working on the same activities that the stronger students did in stage four.
**Stage  Six** The group comes back into lockstep and works on a final activity in which either a)students are paired high/low level with the stronger having a more demanding role, b)students are again paired high/low and work on an activity in which the strong students help the weaker students c) students are paired high/high, low/low and work on an activity at their own level.
This constant switching between lockstep and ability group work has various advantages :
**a)** Most importantly, the lockstep allows the students to develop a single group identity and collaborative working dynamic. However, this will only happen if the lockstep stages are productive and non-threatening for everyone. The split group stages ensure that when the students do come together they are all able to work on an activity which is the correct level of challenge for all members

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of the group. No-one needs to feel they're wasting time waiting for the others or that they are "out of their depth" in comparison to other members of the group.

**b)** The lesson format also has the practical advantage, if you are using on-line courses, that you don't need an enormous number of computers. Only half the group will be at the computers at any one time. If they work in pairs that means that three computers would be sufficient for a group of twelve.

Why though should you choose on-line materials over any other type of materials? They have two practical advantages:

**a)** firstly, they are specifically designed for autonomous study and staged accordingly, whilst "ordinary" materials tend to be designed for teacher-led classes and may not be suitable for students working alone.

**b)** putting together a sequence of activities taken from various sources, plus supplementing them with answers, explanations etc to make them suitable for autonomous study means a considerable amount of preparation for the teacher and can be very time consuming. A coherent on-line course will already have done most of the work for you – preparation is confined to familiarising yourself with the materials and choosing which activities you want each group to do at which point of the lesson.

### To conclude

The key strategy for teaching mixed level classes are probably developing a positive and collaborative working atmosphere and providing a variety of work suitable for different levels. Pretending that everything is OK and students are getting on well is not a solution. A teacher should always try to make the whole class more involved in the studying process and overcome mixed-ability problems with classroom management tips.

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