

SOME PROBLEMS OF TEACHING ESP IN MULTI-LEVEL CLASSES

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Keywords: multi-level class, mixed ability class, linguistic level, curriculum, teaching methods, ESP, language proficiency, different skills, progress rate.

One of the biggest challenges of the ESP (English for specific purposes) teacher is working in multi-level class. Multi-level or mixed ability class as used in ELT usually refers to the differences that exist in a group in terms of different levels of language proficiency. The differences which cause problems in heterogeneous classes are in language learning ability, learning experience, mother tongue, cultural background, preferred learning style, motivation and others. Even though students are grouped according to their placement test scores, their progress rates are bound to be at different levels. Due to the mentioned differences students react to the teaching material and teaching methods individually. It is difficult to find activities that involve all the students without some getting bored and others being confused, insecure or discouraged. Weaker students not being able to follow the pace, to understand information or to express their ideas and stronger students not being tolerant to them may result in classroom management problems. Thus, teachers need to have a range of strategies for managing mixed ability classes [1].

And all ESP classes are multi-level, even those not officially designated as

such: for example, one student may be strong in speaking skills while another strong in reading. The challenge is holding everyone's interest and meeting everyone's needs, no matter what their level is. A variety of students study in a multi-level class: students who are just learning to speak English, students who are fluent but want to work on their pronunciation, as well as students who have conversational English but need to work on academic skills.

Mixed ability or 'heterogeneous' classes are terms used to describe classes made up of students of different levels of proficiency. These terms are misleading as no two learners are really alike and 'homogeneous' classes do not actually exist [6]. All classes are to some degree made up of learners who differ in many ways. They may have different strengths, weaknesses and approaches to learning. They may respond differently to various teaching methods and classroom situations.

Teaching the multilevel class can be challenging. Instructors have to be flexible to accommodate not only different levels of English learning but also different language skills and instructional methods. With flexibility, however, teach-

ing the multilevel class can be very rewarding [3].

There is no need to say that at present proficiency in several foreign languages is an essential requirement for employment in European community and the necessity to master several foreign languages is stipulated not only by economic factors, but also by political and cultural development of the individual. In this regard, nowadays it is quite obvious that teaching English as a foreign language in higher educational establishments is becoming increasingly important. Ukraine's integration into the world community and the setting of closer economic, political and cultural ties has resulted in urgent need to master at least one foreign language. Universities all over Ukraine actively participate in the process of reforming higher education by including English in the curriculum at all stages of specialist education. Therefore, new educational competence-oriented methods and approaches to teaching big mixed-level groups will have a positive impact on students' language proficiency [4].

Teachers may encounter 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: 1) We've got a syllabus to get through, but most of the students are already behind. 2) Half the students have finished an exercise when the other half have only just begun. 3) The stronger students dominate in class. 4) The weaker students don't even try. 5) The stronger students get bored if the teacher takes time to explain to the

weaker ones. 6) The weaker students sit at the back and start disrupting the lesson etc.

Moreover, teachers may find their mixed ability classes are chaotic or difficult to control. Discipline problems occur when learners feel frustrated, lose concentration, get bored, or behave in a disruptive manner. Besides, learners may differ in their learning styles, motivation and interests. Teachers of mixed ability classes may find it difficult to provide content and activities that are motivating and interesting to all learners in a class [3]. Teachers may find it difficult to get to know and follow the progress of all learners in a class. In classes where there are many differences, teachers are not able to devote time and attention equally to all learners. In mixed ability classes, more advanced learners tend to participate more actively than weaker learners. Lack of participation or attention from the teacher, may further affect weaker learners proficiency in the subject.

With mixed ability classes, three approaches can be considered [4]:

1. Activities and exercises are aimed at the general level of the class. Stronger students will find these easy, weaker students will find these hard.

2. Push the level up or down so that you include the stronger or weaker students. This can often mean you «lose» the majority of the students.

3. Target the majority of students but set extra work or more difficult work for the stronger students or easier tasks for the weaker students. This can result in those students feeling «left out» of the

main class; either feeling punished or singled out due to their skill or lack of ability [3].

With mixed-abilities groups, a frequently employed strategy is to supply open-ended tasks so that each student can complete them according to their level [2]. Such strategy can be coupled with group and pair work, so that students could help each other, correct their peers and seek help from those with better English language skills. Sometimes adults, especially older ones in higher decision making positions in their professional careers, find it more embarrassing to ask for clarification from the teacher than from their own learning colleagues.

There are some useful strategies for managing mixed ability classes. First of all, it is important to create a supportive learning environment in the classroom, where learners feel confident and able to perform to the best of their ability. Teachers must be mindful of the pace of their lessons. Teaching a class too slowly or too quickly may lead to boredom or frustration. A teacher must be aware of his/her learners' abilities and pitch the pace of the lesson accordingly [1].

Adapting materials is useful: course books are designed for a particular language level and do not offer much flexibility. As a result teachers may need to adapt the materials to make them easier or more challenging.

Homework is an excellent tool to provide learners of all levels and abilities with an opportunity to review and consolidate the material covered in class.

Individualization is 'providing opportunities for students to work at their own pace, in their own style and at topics of their choice'. Individualization can be promoted in the classroom through portfolios, self-assessment, individualized writing or personalised dictionaries [2].

Grouping language students according to their level, so that beginners sit with other beginners and solve only lower level tasks is common practice when working with mixed abilities groups. While advantages are obvious, including the fact that students may feel less ashamed of their performance in a group of learners with the same level, it is not the best solution. When beginner students are grouped with more advanced ones and they can learn a lot from each other [5].

In ESP teaching, situational factors and learner level of language competence are always the first pillars on which a course is designed and conducted. Success, however, depends also on other factors. Decision making in planning and delivering ESP courses is never easy. Ideally, each learner should be addressed with individualized tasks and materials, so everybody should get the most of a learning session; in practice this is almost impossible [4].

To sum it up, the most challenging teaching problems can still be successfully solved by applying different strategies. The English language teacher dealing with a mixed-ability class has to adopt a mixture of solutions meeting the needs of both advanced and average students, simultaneously facilitating favourable and friendly atmosphere among all

members of the academic group. It is essential to create successful teaching and learning environment. Modifying the content of the basic curriculum is supposed to respond to the diversity of academic needs within mixed ability classes [6]. Variety in the type of working groups, taking into consideration students' preferences, selected materials, choice in presentation formats are differentiated teaching strategies that will make a classroom a welcoming and encouraging place to motivate English language learners, involve all students in the lesson and ensure their progress.

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