

MIXED ABILITY CLASSES IN EFL LEARNING: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract: Every learner has his own learning style, linguistic background knowledge or individual face of learning and developing. Therefore, the majority of foreign language classes involve students of varying abilities. One class can consist of learners who display a number of differences in their learning abilities, motivation, previous exposure to learning, learning style, personality, attitude, and hundred thousands other features that anyone can think of . The situation becomes one challenge for many ESL/EFL teachers in teaching mixed ability classes. This emerges some educators to differentiate the instructions, set grouping strategies, create well structured cooperative activities and integrate meaningful content for the learners who may struggle with first and second language literacy skills. Therefore, 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.

Keywords: Mixed ability classes, EFL learning, problems, solutions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Every learner has his own learning style, linguistic background knowledge or individual face of learning and developing. Therefore, the majority of foreign language classes involve students of varying abilities. One class can consist of learners who display a number of differences in their learning abilities, motivation, previous exposure to learning, learning style, personality, attitude, and hundred thousands other features that anyone can think of. A more sophisticated and confusing term is very often used as a synonym is a "heterogeneous" class (consisting of elements that are not of the same kind or nature, Pavlou and Xanthou (2002:1).

The situation becomes one challenge for many ESL/EFL teachers in teaching mixed ability classes. 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.

Some result of studies about the mixed ability classes were presented in Sarajevo conference in September, 3-7, 2007 show that the differences which cause problems in heterogeneous classes are in language learning ability, language

knowledge, and cultural background, learning style, attitude towards language, mother tongue, personality, confidence, motivation, interest, and educational level. However, these variations may occur in different degrees, in different classes.

This emerges some educators to differentiate the instructions, set grouping strategies, create well structured cooperative activities and integrate meaningful content for the learners who may struggle with first and second language literacy skills. Therefore, 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.

II. Some Problems in the Mixed Ability Classes

1. Students Participation

Jaya (2017) 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. A situation in China studied by Ju lin (2007) show that the stronger students are more active in learning. They are not

afraid of asking questions or using the target language even when producing errors. While weaker learners remain silent even when they want to ask questions and participate. Moreover, students without prior knowledge of English are discouraged from getting involved in the lesson.

2. 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. Hence, teachers should be aware of the different interests of the students to organize and to arrange activities accordingly.

3. Negative Environment

The essence of managing a class is to create a positive environment where teacher and students can enjoy the teaching learning process. The ideal situation occur when teachers and educators do not have to worry about students behavior at all and simply concentrate on the educating or teaching process because they know that the

students will be well behaved and show high level of performance. Unfortunately, this is not a realistic situation in a mixed ability class. Teachers and educators are sometimes not able to create a mutual understanding between themselves and the students in order to run the class as smoothly as possible and encourage learning process as much as possible. It is because the teachers and the educators tend to get difficulties in managing the mixed ability class.

4. Inadequate Materials

All classes are mixed ability to one extent or another. Extreme cases, when you have near native level speakers with beginners, can be very challenging for the teacher. In these cases 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.

Since most language textbooks are designed for an ideal homogeneous 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 his/her class.

Budden (2002) from British Council states that one way to adapt materials is to rewrite reading texts and grade the language accordingly for different levels. In an ideal world where a teacher has all the time in the world to prepare their classes this may be the perfect solution. However, the reality is that this sort of adaptation is extremely time consuming and not many teachers can actually go to this length to adapt materials for mixed level groups. Another problem that can arise with this sort of adaptation is that it can be awkward to give out different texts to different students. There's a danger that they will instantly realize that they have been labeled as a weak or strong student and, in the case of the weaker students, this will no doubt effect their motivation.

5. Ineffective 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.

III. How to Solve the Problems

1. Lesson Plan

A basic responsibility is considering and responding to the needs of our students. It is really necessary for a teacher to prepare the teaching plan to be conducted in his class. Recently, some of the textbooks have been prepared considering the mixed ability classes and include contingency activities in teacher's books. Especially for a mixed ability class that might consist of the slow and fast learners, it is advisable to have contingency 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. Nevertheless, teachers are the ones who should/could know which contingency plan works better after which activity in their class. If teachers consider an activity to be irrelevant or not engaging enough, there are many other tasks which may be more appropriate, such as surveys, using a stimulus picture and prompt questions (Who... Where... When...What...), or a series of pictures which need to be sequenced before a story is discussed. So, if the course book is inadequate we need to employ the following steps: select, adapt, reject and supplement, Harmer (2004).

2. Group/Pair work activities

According to Fertig (2003), 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 language/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 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.

3. Individual Various Tasks

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.

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 **personalising 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.

4. Fun Learning Activities

Students love **fun activities, 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. Moreover, fun learning activities can be a powerful language learning tool. Competitions provide children opportunities to communicate using the target language, practicing the learned linguistic knowledge in a meaningful and vivid context, promoting fluency. Language games e.g. card games may solve problems related to mixed ability classes as they allow flexibility which is crucial in a class with many proficiency levels. The teacher can give cards with easier items assigning easiest tasks to true beginners while more difficult things can be given to more advanced children.

5. Independent Learning activity

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 favorite extreme sports like parachuting.

IV. Conclusion

In most EFL primary school classrooms, some learners perform greater beyond grade-level expectations, others

struggle with target language, while another great part of the class falls somewhere in between. In their effort to meet the needs of such a diverse student population, educators need to assign pair and group work with students of different ability levels finding ways to involve all students in the lesson. Such ways could include communicative and cooperative tasks to allow scaffolding of less advanced children. In this classroom environment advanced level students act as a bridge to facilitate the learning process and lower level classmates exhibit a willingness to cross that bridge (Sean, 2002) in a learning environment which stimulates meaningful communication and provides opportunities for language games and differentiation of activities providing benefits to all kinds of learners. Teachers need to promote a lively, language rich environment attracting active participation of all linguistic levels in the mixed ability classes.

The point is that you should treat every class as a mixed ability class. On the more serious note, this is what you can do:

- a. Use group work, pair work, and individual work, Provide texts suitable for the age of the group,
- b. Follow your course book, which contains a variety of task, but also find some supplemental materials,
- c. Let students interview one another, talk to each other and to you,
- d. Let students prepare some topics of their own,
- e. Ask open-ended questions and encourage creativity without limiting the students to single *no* or *yes* answer.
- f. Play interesting games,
- g. And most of all forget this heterogeneous stuff and concentrate on variety of interesting tasks.

It is the teachers' and the educator's belief that a better understanding of language learners can have a beneficial effect on the process of attempting to help language learners in learning English as a foreign language.

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