

Fostering Language Learning Ambiance in Mixed - Ability Classes Using Appropriate Instructional Strategies

Dr. K. Yugandhar, Associate Professor,
Department of English,
Dilla University, Dilla, Ethiopia, Africa

Abstract: Generally ESL class is an amalgam of students with different learning styles, different paces of learning, variations in motivation and varying analyzing capacities. Psychological orientation of students and Organizational orientation of the class are directly related to their achievement in language acquisition. The class needs to bring the feeling of success and appreciation to every student with everyone's contribution for the achievement of the class through collaborative learning. This paper focuses to address day to day challenges of a mixed-ability class by providing a few strategies to teachers for effective language teaching / learning as stated below:

- *Creating ambiance conducive for language learning to motivate everyone to participate in the class within a common curriculum framework*
- *Send a strong message to all learners that achievement and progress of every learner is equally valuable in the class*
- *Plan every class based on the prior learning and attainments of the learners using appropriate continuous evaluation.*

Thus the teacher orchestrates the groups of mixed abilities with in the class and devises materials and activities suitable for various levels of learning. The students own the responsibility for their learning with a positive competitive spirit among peer groups.

Key Words: *Language Acquisition, Mixed-Ability Class, Collaborative Learning, Instructional Strategies*

Introduction

Generally ESL class has students with mixed abilities. Two or more distinct levels of ability present in a class with the same desired level of language skills. These groups of students have different learning styles, different paces of learning, variations in motivation and varying

analyzing capacities. Naturally, this is a challenge for a teacher to solve and simple solutions cannot meet such a complexity. This paper tries to explore effective strategies and techniques for mixed-ability classes focusing on the nature of a group and psychological aspects of language learning.

Most of the English language classes are heterogeneous in terms of students' capacities, interests and pace of learning. As they came from different backgrounds, they have differences in learning styles, learning speeds. The language teacher facing such a diverse class with two or more distinct levels of ability has to address the problem of how to meet the needs of everyone in the class. Students have differences in their linguistic competence. Differences can be made between specified levels of ability and between different skills namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Phonology, Grammar and Vocabulary. Besides these variations, all students have a complex of personal characteristic that influence their approach to the acquisition of a foreign language. These variables involve in the development of second language skills.

Learners of Mixed-Ability in a Class

Ireson & 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. A mixed ability class does not just consist of a range of abilities but also a range of learning styles and preferences. 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 different activities or differentiated material. 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. 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.

Slow learners can be divided into two groups. The first group of students does not learn successfully due to general socio-cultural problems, frustrating former language classroom experiences, inadequate use of strategies, or lack of interest. The second types of students are formally diagnosed as "learning-disabled" by specialists in child psychology. Struggled learners often lack self-esteem. They are also very sensitive to exaggerated or artificial praise. They require individual attention and recognition for any work they do. The weaker students reflect deficient learning skills and strategies. They use rote memory rather than reasoning. Difficulty in transferring knowledge from one area to other influences their lack of fluency, clarity and

precision in using language. The weakest skills of slow learners are generally writing and reading.

On the contrary, effective learners can learn a language faster as they have a tremendous memory for vocabulary, which they seem to be able to pick up in class merely by paying attention. They have a sound understanding of the structures of the language and very quickly develop the ability to use them in a great variety of patterns. They express themselves at a much higher level than the average students, who simply follows the given pattern. Moreover, they imitate new sounds quickly and correctly. Students of this sort find it frustrating to limit them to a given context, and they try to break out of it. Most are highly competitive. There is the danger that they will lose interest or patience when slowed down by peers who cannot learn as quickly, or when there are too many repetitions of the material they have already learned. They may try to manipulate class proceedings in order to get most of the teacher's attention. They are very sensitive and tend to be embarrassed when corrected.

Psychological Orientation of Mixed-ability Learners Class

Psychological orientation of students is directly related to their achievement in language acquisition. Their emotions, attitudes and personalities affect their reasoning processes as well as willingness to learn and succeed. Cognitive style refers to the predispositions individuals have for using their intellect in specific ways to learn. Some students prefer oral learning which includes listening and speaking, while others base on their visual memory and prefer reading and writing. Individual approach to learning relates also to personality. Introverts are centred on themselves; they tend to be shy and reticent. They are conscientious and dedicated to the task. Extroverts are more outgoing and aggressive. They participate more actively in class with less fear of risk-taking. Some students have no problems with grammar or phonetics. Others suffer from language-learning disability. Despite great effort they put in learning they can't achieve satisfactory results. These different capabilities are mentally conditioned by personal traits that handicap language-learning but they don't mirror intelligence. Learners who lack self-confidence are not willing to prepare and participate in lessons. They tend to adopt defensive procedures to protect themselves from the discomfort and failure.

The study of second language requires a sustained commitment. Skills that are developed at one level must be retained for all subsequent study and use of the language. Students may feel that learning a language is impossible or that it prevents them from devoting time to a more interesting subject. They will be full of apprehension and hostility. Positive classroom experiences can change their attitudes; however it will not happen spontaneously. Motivation is strictly connected with interests and needs of students. They arrive in class with a variety of attitudes about language, the people who speak it, and their culture. A high regard for them as well as belief that knowing the language will be beneficial in the future make learners expend the

time and energy to develop communication skills. Students who think about their future professional careers know that ability to communicate is a predicament nowadays. They learn more and tend to remember longer the material that relates most closely to their interests. Besides, they try to increase their knowledge outside the school and attempt to use it whenever possible.

Valid objectives for some learners are good grades. They give the class their serious attention not because they like to learn the language, but because they want to be good at all subjects. Sometimes it is connected with expectations of their parents and willingness to satisfy them. Finally, learners are likely to have certain attitudes about the teacher and the class. Their willingness to cooperate or not is based on rumours about the teacher, his/ her expectations and requirements. The pressure of peers very often influences the motivation of students and their views. The desire to succeed can be changed into negative attitude towards the subject and vice versa.

Organizational Orientation

Teacher aims to reach all students through effective teaching learning. Their needs as learners differ, there are good students, average students and below average students and it are difficult to meet all their needs. Rural students become another problem in a mixed ability class and a gap can easily be detected between rural and urban students. Materials, Participation of students and their interests are the major areas to be concerned to create a culture of learning through organizational orientation.

- If there are individual differences, then the material in a mixed ability class must also differ. For teachers it is not possible to collect material accordingly and teachers are in a fix how to deal such a class. Selected material can be boring and very hard for some students, whereas some find it interesting and very easy
- Some students participate eagerly in the class presentations, discussions and dialogues while others are passive and just listening and observing all the activities. They don't pay heed to the presentations and discussions and they believe let them do.
- As the students come with diverse backgrounds; their interest is not the same due to their knowledge of language; and their personality. For instance, some students find lessons boring, as the topic has no familiarity with their own life or their interests. Students remain uncommunicative and shy if the teacher is talking too much in the class.

Learners' achievement in language acquisition largely depends on their surroundings. Teachers and their professionalism, parents and their support and social situations of learners are

of a considerable importance and influence their approach. Students' awareness about their society has an impact on the process of learning. Learners who reached certain level in developing skills in their native language are likely to have fewer problems in acquiring those skills in other languages. Many parents want their children to have contact with second language as soon as possible. They do not think of the present levels of their wards' language abilities but expects them to possess the best of the language abilities in the possible least time. This is the reason why teachers in ESL classes deal with students on different levels of ability.

Teachers execute various pedagogical approaches analytic / synthetic and different methods like behaviouristic, cognitive and communicative during various activities according to the needs of the particular groups of learners. They encourage students to access to cable and satellite TV, radio, available books and magazines that provide them exposure to the use of authentic language and help them master it. Computer-Aided Language Learning classes provide individualized and independent opportunities of learning and practicing facilities for the learners. Learners who could not get exposure to the effective usage of the language are provided with the authentic material for motivation besides the process of acquisition. Adapted and adopted authentic material provides ambiance conducive for language acquisition.

A Few Instructional Strategies for Differentiated, Mixed-Ability Classes

One of the most common problems of mixed-ability classes is cohesion. It does not depend only on the content of the lesson, but also on the way the content is presented and practiced. Classroom management affects an environment in which students are expected to learn. It refers to social relationships and conditions that exist in the class. It shapes the dynamics of mixed-ability lessons and influences their integration.

Time: The learners differ in concentration span and the speed in which they are likely to apply their knowledge. That is why the teacher should not plan to do too much in a lesson, but prepare "extra" materials e.g. an anecdote, joke or game. Throughout the lesson the students should be aware how much time they have for each activity, so that they would be able to complete the task. The sense of rhythm and shape of the lesson can be gained by alternate arrangement of short, light activities with long and more intense ones.

The Use of L1: There are no hard rules concerning the use of L1. The most important principles are to make the students comprehend the target language, raise their self-esteem, help them to personalize their learning and acquire a new language of self-expression. It is important that the students can learn a lot from hearing instructions and explanations in L2, as the main objective is to expose them to as much L2 as possible. However, it frequently evokes strain and difficulties in understanding, especially among the slower learners. Therefore, the teacher must be consistent in the usage of management language, reinforcing the meaning of that language through the use of

mime, gesture or visuals. It is useful to say in L1 what has already been said in L2. Moreover, L1 can provide support and security for the less confident learners when explaining grammatical rules, abstract vocabulary items and concepts.

Cross-Checking: Attention in the class can be focused and held if the teacher involves the students in what the others are saying. This is especially useful when particular students are trying to express themselves, and the rest of the class has stopped listening. Reporting back the answers their peers have given can reduce discipline problems and encourage the students to be more responsive to the content of other learners' presentations.

Pair-Work and Group-Work: The use of pair and group work is essential if you are to involve all the members of the class. A fundamental technique here is the use of questionnaires and interviews. By pairing off weaker and stronger students and involving both in the preparation and implementation of the questionnaire you should ensure maximum participation of all the students. The teacher then gets the weaker students to interview the stronger ones and vice-versa. Of course, this may be frustrating for the stronger ones, but if they are able to see their role as that of "helper" or even mentor, it may also have a positive effect. Teacher needs to devise such activities that suits to the needs of the particular class.

The second area of activity that can be productive in mixed-ability classes is project work. Again, this can work successfully using mixed groups where the stronger help the weaker, but another approach is to form groups that are at approximately the same level and assign different tasks that are appropriate to the level of each group. By adjusting the complexity of the task, the teacher can ensure that each group has a task that it can carry out successfully, thereby providing the correct level of challenge for the higher level students and not demotivating the weaker ones.

Teaching Material: Although modern textbooks contain topics and vocabulary that are of greater interest of contemporary students, it seems justifiable to introduce authentic sources. The teacher should prepare extra materials that satisfy different demands and expectations. Audio and video recordings, articles from magazines and newspapers usually evoke enthusiasm and relieve the monotony of lessons. Being attracted and more involved in the target language environment the students are more aware of its culture and different aspects of life. Diversified classes can encourage and stimulate even the most passive students.

Self-Education: The students' different motivations, abilities and level of proficiency create the necessity to self-study. As the teacher cannot teach the students everything during lessons he/she has to train them to teach themselves and take charge of their own learning. The learners should develop personal learning strategies that are effective for them. They achieve more when they make most of their own resources. The basic dictionary skills and the understanding of meta-

language enable them to expand their knowledge. Working on their own the students select structures, expressions and vocabulary that they feel they will use in the future. That is why whatever they learn in the process of self-education constitutes more active part in their minds. The learners can be involved in self-study from the very beginning of the course. It should not be confined only to advanced students. Even young children can prepare simple projects which require the minimum of the language knowledge. They become accustomed to self-dependence and responsibility for their education.

Activities: In mixed-ability class students' work in a different pace and with varied effectiveness. That is why special emphasis should be put on tasks which do not require immediate and identical responses. Setting activities that challenge all learners intellectually is essential. They can be tasks with graded level of difficulty: easier, less complicated activities for slower learners and more demanding for more advanced. All the students are able to complete them at the same time. During project work students focus on presenting information on a subject relevant to themselves, work at their own pace in an uncompetitive environment. It brings the feeling of success and appreciation as every student is able to contribute in some way to the completion of the task. Grading difficulties combined with pair-work or group-work make it possible to maintain a high level of interest and cooperation.

Evaluation: The main aim of evaluation is not only to test students' knowledge but also to raise their motivation through emphasizing their achievements in the language. It includes informal subjective estimates of student work and formalized testing procedures. Both of them are components of the total picture of classroom performance.

Both forms of evaluation are valid but they are used in different ways. Informal subjective evaluation of student performance in the classroom serves primarily as feedback to the teacher. It enables to make adjustments that will improve weaknesses in teaching procedures but also provides students with immediate feedback on their progress in the class. Test results, on the other hand, give statistics upon which grades are based. They also show students' strength and arrears in the language. Good grade on a test is a positive reinforcement and an incentive to work harder.

Conclusions

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 classed could be homogeneous in terms of these aspects. The key strategy for teaching English to mixed ability classes is probably developing a positive and collaborative working atmosphere and providing a variety of work suitable for different levels. The use of pair and group work is essential to involve all the

members of the class. Project works can work successfully using mixed groups where the learners work together supporting one another in improving their linguistic expertise. Assigning more challenging home works to the stronger students in the group should ensure that they remain motivated and continue to make progress. Choral drilling can be an effective way of involving weaker or shy students. Teachers need to be diplomatic in your questioning techniques. Manifesting these issues in day to day class work, a few instructional strategies are provided to teachers for effective language teaching/learning in mixed ability classes.

1. Creating ambiance conducive for language learning to motivate everyone to participate in the class within a common curriculum framework

The class culture is vital to facilitate the ambiance conducive for learning. In this respect the learners are to be placed in sets to enable the work can be done *more purposeful* and *focused*. Motivating particular groups of learners is difficult in both mixed ability and set arrangements. It is perceived that it was easier to motivate learners who work more slowly than others through mixed ability arrangements; however, the motivation of fast learners is more difficult within mixed ability classes. The teacher needs to have extra materials with open ended activities within the curriculum to address such situations to engage fast learners. Lightbown and Spada agree: “Varying the activities, tasks, and materials can help to avoid this [boredom] and increase students’ interest levels”. For Tomlinson “the teacher assumes that different learners have differing needs”. Therefore he or she has to plan a variety of ways in an effort to come to meet all learners’ needs. Thus every student’s need is to be addressed by creating effective class culture.

2. Send a strong message to all learners that achievement and progress of every learner is equally valuable in the class

The class culture need to consistently focus on the point that the cooperation amongst the learners and support for one another rather than competition between them. There are implications for how learners perceive that their progress and achievements are valued if the focus for teacher is on the more formal procedures of recording and monitoring progress of each individual. The teacher needs to indirectly refer to tests as a means of letting learners know about their achievement and progress in improving their proficiency in using the language. Individualization was a reality for those learners who had chosen *learner autonomy*. It was only within that context that students could plan, carry out, and evaluate their own tasks. These students sought feedback only when they needed it. Other students followed a more traditional structured learning pattern. Tomlinson as well, comments on the benefits of giving particular or individual feedback, she means that “what is helpful for one student may not be for another” Each student in the class need to feel that his/her progress is observed and valued by the teacher which motivates him/ her to advance language skills.

3. Plan every class based on the prior learning and attainments of the learners using appropriate continuous evaluation

The notion of building on prior learning was generally acknowledged to be an essential feature of effective learning and teaching. However, it became apparent that some issues exist in relation to this principle. Continuous assessment is the only way teachers can keep up-to-date information about every learner's academic situation. That information can, and should, be used as guidelines to prepare individually directed lessons with the purpose of meeting everyone's needs. Continuous assessment can help us to detect learner profiles and adjust instruction in order to, through variation, come to satisfy all learner styles. Needless to say, in order to give grades, a teacher cannot work only with processes. The instruction process has to result in a final or summative product that teachers have to evaluate. It is preferable to assess their improvement of communicative skills by placing them either in small groups or in pairs. If teacher knows the learners' attainment well it will help to plan and work as per the needs of individual class. Thus the Knowledge of learner's is certainly very important to improve the quality of the mixed-ability class.

To sum up, teaching mixed-ability ESL classes is never easy, especially in ESL class where individual care is necessary for sharpening various elements of the language. The classroom management is a challenge and the teacher needs to do prepare suitable material and method beforehand. Students need to be aware the reasons for the group work. Learners need to understand various instructions given to various groups, so they have to listen carefully and the teacher needs to verify that all instructions are understood at the suitable point of the activities. In order not to lose entirety, the sense of a whole class, the beginning and concluding activities should be for the whole class. Thus the teacher orchestrates the groups of mixed abilities with in the class and devises materials and activities suitable for various levels of learning. The students own the responsibility for their learning with a positive competitive spirit among peer groups.

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