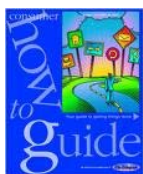


## 5.- How to cope with mixed ability classes



# How to... Cope with the Problems of Mixed Ability Classes

By Deniz Şalli-Çopur

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 (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. Hence, ***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 heterogeneous 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 (Ur 1996, 304).** 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 teachers, 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 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.**

### **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. Hence, **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 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. Recently, some of the textbooks have been prepared considering the mixed ability classes and include contingency activities in teacher's books. Nevertheless, teachers are the ones who should/could know which contingency plan works better after which activity in their class.

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 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.

6. Students love **games, competitions and dramatisation**, 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 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.

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.

10. It is also useful for students to study in **self-access centres**, where they can visit in their free times to study alone, with a peer or a tutor. The main aim of self-access centres is that students decide on what they want to study. While the students can find appropriate materials such as extra exercises, they can also make use of cassettes, videos and/or books to improve their language.

### Applying the Solutions

One of my mixed ability classes was a 24-student sixth grade (11-12 years old) English Literature class, where the students varied in terms of their background, language knowledge, motivation and interest in English. As an English Literature class, we would read children's short stories and poems through the semester. The students were good at reading and understanding what they read, but they were not very good at expressing what they think orally and through written work. Once I gave them pictures to encourage them to write stories, which they found difficult, although they had the chance to use monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. After reading about open-ended activities, I thought it would be effective to use such tasks with my sixth graders so that all students could write and express their feelings according to their level.

To begin with, I asked each student to write a letter to someone who knew nothing about him/her. This person could be a favourite pop star, a successful soccer player or a new e-pal. The aim of the letters was to introduce himself/herself to that person. Thus, there would be more than one correct answer since all the students could freely talk about themselves and express their ideas, thoughts and feelings. In addition, this was an opportunity for me, as a teacher, to learn about the interests of my students.

At the beginning of the activity, I explained clearly what they would do and gave them examples. Then, I informed them that they could use their monolingual and/or bilingual dictionaries in order to find the words they wanted to use in their sentences. I did not put any word limit on the letters, but I told them that the letter should give information on many aspects of themselves from physical appearance to education, from hobbies to dislikes.

When the students started writing, I tried to monitor all and to help them when it is necessary. While some students started writing right after I finished the instructions, some others tried to find something to start with. Hence, I tried to give some ideas by asking "What is your favourite sport?", "Where do you like to go in your holiday?" or "Do you have a pet?".

Since some students are fast in writing and good at expressing their ideas easily, they finished earlier than most of the students. Therefore, I made the early finishers exchange their letters with another early finisher to give suggestions about the content and to correct the mistakes, which gave time to the slow students to finish their letters. When all of the students finished writing their letters, I collected all the letters, mixed them up and then chose one of them. I read the letter without saying who had written it, and I asked the students to guess the writer of the letter as each letter gave information about its writer. The student who guessed it correctly came and chose another letter to read to his friends. At the end of the lesson, most of the letters were finished and all the students had listened to the letters and guessed the writers.

Moreover, I read all the letters after the lesson on my own for correction and wrote short replies (to give feedback). On another day I gave the letters back to the students and

asked them to revise their letters according to my comments and rewrite it. The students put both the in-class version and rewritten version into their portfolios.

I believe this activity was effective for all students, as they really liked to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings through a letter as if they had written it to someone, who knew nothing about them. They used the language at their own level; writing about themselves made the task personalised, and they were all successful at the end as they finished their letter. Being quicker is not a disadvantage for the early finishers; they enjoyed giving feedback to a piece of work, which is a useful contingency plan to improve language.

The only problem was that some students could not decide what to write about as quickly as the other students. However, that may have been due to the fact that they rarely write to express themselves in the target language, so they were not used to it. It is for sure that with these kinds of activities for mixed abilities, they will get used to them.

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