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Differentiated teaching, learning and comprehension activities in a mixed ability class: A challenge

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Abstract
English is recognised to be, in Indian minds, a socially well respected and a standardised way of living. In present times, English is the most preferred language. Though Language learning is a natural process for all, the students of other languages, are required to put effort in learning a foreign language. The students of rural and semi-urban areas in India face such problems for English is not their mother-tongue. Nowadays most of the institutions are filled with heterogeneous classes where students of different levels of attention, interest, learning styles, speed, maturity, types of intelligence are formed to be in groups which pose direct challenges to teachers. Teachers' main objective is to connect with all the students by interacting and monitoring them in various other ways to achieve effective teaching. Students of the rural areas assume English as a subject study and do not realize the need and importance of English as a language of communication used around the world. A systematic approach should be followed in order to solve the hurdles. Moreover the teachers should aim teaching not just for knowledge but skill. This paper deals with the problem of teaching English in mixed ability classes to achieve better results in the teaching and learning of English.

Keywords: English language, language learning, mother-tongue, students, teachers & hurdles

Introduction

In a multilingual and multicultural country like India, classes of mixed ability groups are a feature of every small town and village. Mixed ability classrooms that accommodate students having different learning styles, interests, prior knowledge, attitudes, strengths, personalities and skills, are commonly found. There is a pedagogic challenge associated with providing equal opportunities to different groups of students, who may be high-ability students consisting of 25% of the class, low ability students consisting of 25% or the average-ability students constituting the rest 50% percent of the class. At the same time, achieving quality standards has led to performance based segregation known as ability grouping. The implications of ability grouping include negative effect on the self-concept of low-ability students.

Grouping of students of different ability levels is one of the most frequently suggested ways. There are different ways of grouping. As Peter Hubbard and others say, "the teacher's first task is to organise groups that are either representative of different ability levels, or mixed so that each is a small cross-section of the class as a whole".

However, these experts, like many others, admit that doing justice to a mixed ability class involves cost, both in terms of money and time. They say: "Teacher-produced material is very demanding on time and energy and it will not be possible to cater in this way for each lesson. It is necessary to have a wide choice of books and visuals, especially graded readers and it is very necessary for the teacher in this situation to be given adequate time for preparation and good facilities for duplication".

Hubbard and others might be talking about a classroom of the west, where the strength of a typical class could be much smaller than that of an Indian classroom

Education has been the primary factor in the more formal transmission of English around the world. In our country we come across classrooms overflowing with students, especially in schools and colleges which have a name. There the students think as we all know that English plays the major role in the field of communication globally. An understanding of and a command over English language is the most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities.

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Acquiring adequate knowledge in English for learners is inevitable in the present scenario. Language learning is a natural process for the natives. Learners who are of rural backgrounds face a number of problems. Here in India, English is taught as the second language in educational institutions. So, students find themselves unable to make proper sentence, and do not know proper pronunciation, spellings and grammatical rules. In most of the situations, majority of students interact in mother tongue inside the classrooms. In this case Good teachers of English might try group work, pair work, etc., with the limited resources and time available to them. However, a large number of college teachers do not do so because of their apprehension that they won't be able to complete the syllabus on time.

Grammar – Translation method is one of the important methods of teaching English in most of the cases. Over the time we have witnessed the growing importance of English language in all walks of life. Because of rapidly increasing web of educational facilities, rural areas too, have been enjoying the facilities of the institutions. But it has neither helped in raising the level of learners, nor made them learn English as a language. Now in the rural and semi-urban areas, study of English language begins at an early age. In Mixed ability level teaching, the teacher is required to make proper plans to teach every learner, who has different ideas, potentialities, skills, interests and learning needs. Though most institutions are usually multi-ability level, teachers find teaching such classes a very difficult and challenging task as it involves planning lessons which include various other of tasks corresponding to a variety of learning styles and abilities. The classroom is the only environment for the learners, where 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. Teachers need to identify the problems of mixed ability classes and try to come out with the solutions of eliminating them.

Teachers' Problems in Teaching English as Second Language in a Mixed Ability Class.
- A teacher might have difficulties in finding appropriate teaching materials and resources that suit the needs, individual language level and interest of all students.
- The tasks included in the lesson should correspond to the language level, and abilities of learners.
- Slow learners can't participate because the tasks are too difficult for them.
- Every learner has individual interests and needs which form their attitude to the subject matter.
- The teacher does not know his/her students level of interests and needs.
- Some of the learners have difficulties speaking the target language for various reasons, while other learners are willing to express their thoughts and ideas in the target language. As a result some students participate actively in the lesson and others do not.
- Extrovert learners tend to occupy the teachers attention while shy learners are suppressed.
- Students work with different pace – those who are more advanced cope quickly with the tasks or get impatient when the teacher has to repeat an explanation, while students who have a lower level of knowledge and skills complete tasks more slowly.
- Active learners finish the tasks given quickly whereas the weaker one cannot complete in time and may lose their confidences. Consequently, mixed abilities may result in classroom management problems.

Remedies to Overcome the Problems of Teaching in a Mixed Ability Class
- The teacher should adapt some of the materials to make the language simple.
- Design simple teaching materials.
- Use visual teaching materials to grab the students' attention and to motivate them to get interested in the subject.
- Reduce the number of choices or should not give the more difficult choices in multiple level exercises.
- Include open-ended tasks which help learners work at their own pace.
- Mix and form groups of weaker and stronger students and make them work with more complicated tasks, whereas the weaker students would understand how stronger students deal with a task.
- Try to know the learners, their language level and interests. Try to find every single student's strength by offering a variety of activities.
- Try to find the strengths and preferred learning style of everyone. Involve and encourage the shy learners. Extra work should be given of something that the students would enjoy doing on their favourite topic. They would be more enthusiastic to work on such projects.

The learners from rural areas do not realize the importance of English as a language of communication and they lack the confidence to speak in English. The main reason is that they have been taught the language through grammar – translation Proceedings of the
This method makes them dependent on their mother-tongue. So, they need more practice for testing their proficiencies.

Sample Analysis
A set of ten students of first year studying in Degree College, was randomly selected for testing. A questionnaire containing ten questions of English grammar with a translation passage was given to them to answer. The errors committed by them were analysed and classified to find out their sources.
Course: B.C.A
Strength: 74
Sample group size: 20
No. of fast learners: 10
No. of slow learners: 10

Sample Question practice:
Questions on Punctuation
Punctuate the following sentences and use capital letters wherever necessary.
a. raju said ravi i like sweets
b. john asks martis where is George

Questions on Spelling
Underline the words with correct spellings.
a. tough, tuf, taugh
b. color, colur, couler
c. innocent, inocent, inosent

Questions on VOCABULARY
a) A list of words is given. The students are asked to group them under village and city.
The words are: parks, cars, trees, shops, animals, mauls, waterfalls, flowers, reapers road, and complexes

b) Write plurals of the following:
Woman, child, information.

c) Write synonyms for the following:
Gratitude, humiliation, intelligent

d) Write antonyms for the following:
Respect, strong, comfortable

e) Write one word substitute:
- Small animal like a mouse.
- Stones used for paving.

Questions on Structures
a) Supply the appropriate form of word:
i. Geetha ---------------- a song in the party yesterday. (Sing, sang, sung)
ii. It ----------------- since morning. (Present perfect continuous tense)

b) Fill in the blanks with appropriate words:
i. The chief guest ----------- the prizes to the winners.
ii. My friends -------------------
iii. She is ----------- today. (Is intelligent, gave up, are playing, gave away)

c) Make questions from the answers so as to get underlined word as answer
i. children are playing cricket.
ii. Tippu Sultan fought courageously with his enemies.

d) Make negative sentences without changing the meaning
i. The knife is sharp.
ii. Samuel is very rich.

e) Change into indirect form:
i. Tom said,"I was swimming when my friend called me"
ii. The visitor said to the attender, "please take me to the office"

f) Change the following sentences as per direction given in the bracket:
i. In spite of his illness, he attended the class (to compound)
ii. He sold his father's house. (to complex)

h) Use appropriate linkers:
i. He is very rich_____unhappy. (and/but)
ii. He cannot walk_____he was weak. (Therefore/because)

Such practices will help them enjoying their play with language. They can understand the importance of grammar.

They can enjoy these exercises and they can also strengthen their skills, once their interest is aroused, they show tremendous improvement. Apart from such practices, the following strategies can also be adopted in the English language learning class.

Organise your classroom with LSRW speaking, listening reading and writing experiences as authentic as possible.
Some experts wholeheartedly believe that, when it comes to language learning, the words "classroom" and "authentic" are incompatible. This is probably true in many situations. However, I do think that it's possible to strategically incorporate authentic speaking and listening time into your lessons AND meet your learning objectives at the same time. Build opportunities for your students to talk about things that interest them. This will show them that you're interested in what they have to say and what they like.

Talk less and make your students speak more.
As a teacher of English language learners, you probably know all the research regarding decreasing TTT and ensuring that student talking time is maximized. The research behind this is substantial to say the least, and I dare not attempt to touch on all of it here. However, I do want to point out that the more opportunities you give your students to speak in class, the more likely it is that they'll be using the language as often as possible outside of the classroom.

Form English speaking groups on the basis of their English knowledge.
We know that, in order to learn a language, students have to practice speaking to others in authentic situations. Setting up peer groups is one fun way to facilitate and encourage this. Just as content area teachers assign group projects pertaining to their content area, ESL teachers can assign group projects with the goal of increasing the amount of time students spend in meaningful communication outside of class.

Create in-class strategies that effectively translate to outside practice.
Sure, our primary responsibility *is* classroom instruction. Most of us have no interest in following our students everywhere they go. It's useful to focus on in-class strategies and ideas that simultaneously benefit students outside the classroom.

Use technology to motivate student interest.
Research clearly indicates that motivation is a huge factor in a student's ability to learn a second language. I mean, that's just common sense, right? Some students may come to your class intrinsically motivated and require very little from you to build interest. Others will require a large degree of extrinsic motivation, and you may need to be creative to find out what excites them.

Conclusion
It's not just about teaching a foreign language, it's about giving your students a well-rounded and complete in-class learning experience. Ultimately, by shaking things up and incorporating different teaching techniques in your classrooms, you students will walk in never knowing what to expect from that day's lessons. They will stay fresh, enthusiastic and motivated when they know that each

class will have new activities and fun learning adventures in store.

This will play out a bit differently in each unique class. No classroom is the same, and every student is unique. The animated classroom you enjoy for your morning class may be drastically different from — if not directly at odds with — your evening class. Because an ESL classroom is always dynamic and evolving, it's important for you to develop your ESL teaching strategies around your students.

Students with English as a second language (ESL) constitute a significant percentage of the population of our nation's schools. This population continues to increase more rapidly than that of native English speaking students. The language minority population has a high dropout rate. These students are also among the lowest ranking in academic achievement and expectations. They represent an at-risk population faced with a wide range of challenges.

This presents a unique challenge for teachers as we strive to help these students achieve in learning the English language and the academic material specified in our content area learning standards. Every teacher who teaches subject matter in English to ESL students is not only a teacher of the content area but is a teacher of English as well. As educators, we must continually reflect on our teaching and update our practice to address the needs of this population, placing a strong emphasis on the human side of teaching. We must continually focus on these students and find effective ways to arrange their learning to help them achieve.

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