



MANAGING CLASSES WITH MIXED ABILITIES

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Abstract

A mixed-ability class can seem uncooperative, the students can get bored easily and this can cause commotion in the classroom. Planning the lesson and making work-material can take too much time for the teacher and the planned material is often too easy or too difficult for the students. This may make the teacher feel inadequate and unable to cope with the class. It is a big challenge to the teacher of a large class to help the weaker students and to keep the stronger students motivated so that all students succeed.

Keywords: mixed-ability, personality, challenge, to keep attention, inadequate, work material

Introduction

Mixed ability teaching is related to working with students who have different personalities, skills, interests and learning needs. Though most classes are usually multi-level, teachers (especially those with little or no experience), find teaching such classes a very difficult and demanding task as it involves planning lessons which include a rich diversity of tasks corresponding to a variety of learning styles and abilities. Baker argues that it is not just the fact that there are many students in a class, but that all of them are at so many different ability levels that provides the biggest challenge. She further claims that in mixed-ability classes it can be difficult to keep the attention of all students. Their motivation can be poor and the teacher can feel frustrated because he/she does not have enough time to help the weaker students. Some classes may also have a wide range of ages, so all classes are mixed ability, but the challenges are bigger in a large class. For example, weaker students may stop learning because they don't understand. The strong students sometimes dominate by gaining most of the teacher's attention and by giving all the answers. Sometimes the stronger ones stop learning because they find the work too easy and get bored. It is a big challenge to the teacher of a large class to help the weaker students and to keep the stronger students motivated so that all students succeed. A mixed-ability class can seem uncooperative, the students can get bored easily and this can cause commotion in the classroom. Planning the lesson and making work-material can take too much





time for the teacher and the planned material is often too easy or too difficult for the students. This may make the teacher feel inadequate and unable to cope with the class. H. Natalie argues that grouping students into one “slow” and one “fast” separate class has been researched, and studies show that students do not improve enough to fit into a typical class, and that they stay remedial. There are both positive and negative sides to grouping students. One positive side is that the lesson can be easier to plan and manage in some ways since the teacher does not have such a wide range of abilities to deal with. On the other hand to separate the slow learners can do harm to their social and emotional difficulties because by being placed in a “slow class” they can think of themselves as different, difficult, inferior or other negative terms.

If you call the groups A, B, C and D, or 1, 2, 3 and 4, it will be clear who is the top of the class and who is bottom. Most students know how good they are, and realize who the weaker or slower students are, so neutral group names are more positive. Call the groups, for example, ‘the Lions’, ‘the Tigers’, ‘the Giraffes’ and ‘the Leopards’, or the ‘Red/Blue/Green/Yellow’ groups. You can give more time to the students who need more of your attention if you form separate groups of weak, average and strong students. To help the weak students, you can do some remedial work and give careful correction. At the same time, you need not ignore the students in the average and strong groups, but help them when they ask you.

Another way of forming groups which can help with different learning abilities is to put students in mixed ability groups. In these groups you can encourage the stronger students to help the weaker ones. If you encourage this peer teaching, or ‘pair helping’, as a positive thing to do, usually most of the stronger students are keen to take on this role. The important features of working with mixed-ability classes is creating a good atmosphere

The advice on how to work with these classes is appropriate for students of all ages and abilities. It is important for teachers to create a relaxed, positive atmosphere in the classroom. Kelly supports this theory, and he also claims that there is a strong connection between a good classroom atmosphere and having good behavior management. This will create a good learning situation. In order to create a good environment, it is vital for the teacher to form a good relationship between him/herself and the students. Examples of how to do that are to learn the students’ names as quickly as possible, as well as learn about their lives, what they like/do not like, interests and difficulties. This should be started as early as possible in a new course, for example by writing a letter to the students and asking them to write back about themselves. This makes the students feel looked upon as individuals and promotes a good relationship.





Anxiety can be a barrier for some students according to Brown. Students can be afraid of making mistakes when they write or talk because of the fear of being laughed at. According to Gordon it is important for the teacher not to rely too much on correctness but to focus on communicative competence and create motivating situations with a calm and welcoming environment where the students know that it is normal to make mistakes as it is a part of the learning process. This can lead to less anxiety among the students. It is also important to set certain rules with the students about how to behave in order not to interfere with a good learning situation. A teacher should discuss proper rules for a good learning situation with the students and why the class needs to have them.

Clear organization is vital in order to create a good atmosphere. A teacher should not just explain what they are going to do each lesson but also why it is important, what they are going to learn and how they are going to work, for example pair work, individual and so on. The teacher should begin each lesson by giving clear instructions to the whole class and end by addressing the whole class to get routines, both daily but also weekly. These routines create a sense of stability and structure which is helpful to many weaker students. For a teacher, assessment is very important, not just after each unit but on a day to day level. This is important because it helps to see how the lesson went and how it can be improved next time by better instructions, group work etc.

For the developing the student's responsibility for learning, it is important to let the students be part of assessment by letting them discuss in small groups with the teacher for example how an assignment went, what could have been improved and so on. Journal writing, whole class discussion or individual written assessments given to the teacher can also be good ways for the students to give the teacher helpful ideas on how to improve different aspects of teaching.

Michael J. Lawson and Donald Hoban both stress the importance of helping the students to learn different learning strategies so the students can develop their own study skills that work for them, since all students have their own ways of learning. It can be very helpful to allow the students to create their own study guides for a test and so on. A teacher should also promote cooperation and collaboration, according to Kelly and Hess. They further argue that teachers should encourage the students to help each other out, to ask classmates for help and give each other feedback on their work because this improves the students' ability to take responsibility for their learning. It can be very useful for the weaker students to be provided with self-assess material so the student can follow his/her progress and evaluate how it goes. This



material needs to have clear instructions on what the student needs to do and also provide some questions for the student to reflect over when a task has been completed. One of the most important ways to deal with mixed-ability classes is to always give clear information and instructions and to present it in easy, manageable ways. This contributes to making the students feel it is more meaningful and interesting. A teacher should introduce tasks clearly by using different methods. The teacher should give the students the information in the whole class, and showing an overhead or writing on the board. When explaining something to the students it is very useful to show concrete examples and illustrations. Using several methods to inform the students reinforces their understanding. After they have been given clear instructions it is advisable to give them time to think and discuss with their workmate and then ask questions. It is important to plan bigger tasks in manageable steps because if the task is not clearly presented to the students, and they are uncertain about how to go on with the task, it can create a problematic situation. Some of the students may feel it is too hard for them, and some may even give up.

To sum up, it is important for the teacher working in a mixed ability class to create a good atmosphere where the students feel secure, can voice their opinions and ask questions without feeling anxious. One of the most important things for the teacher to aim for is to be clear and structured. It is important to help students improve their own learning techniques and develop their cooperation and collaboration with their peers.

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