

Teaching interactive skills in mixed ability classes

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Annotation: The aims of essay are to find out what resource literature says about how English teachers should work in large mixed-ability classes to make sure they help all students improve their English and also to find out what views three upper secondary English teachers have on how to reach all students. I have chosen to limit the area I am going to investigate by focusing on upper secondary English teachers and how they need to work to help the weaker students in mixed ability classes.

Key words: mixed-ability classes, interests, ability, motivation

What is a mixed-ability class? Mixed-ability classes means classes where students differ greatly in ability, motivation for learning English, needs, interests, educational background, styles of learning, anxiety, experiences and so on (Ainslie, 1994). All teachers have to face the challenge of mixed-ability classes because, according to Tomlinson, Berry & Williams and Shank, every class is multileveled. Some classes can be more multileveled than others and therefore more challenging for the teacher, but all classes are mixed-ability classes.

What is important when working with mixed-ability classes? Creating a good atmosphere The advice on how to work with these classes is appropriate for students of all ages and abilities (Kelly). It is important for teachers to create a relaxed, positive atmosphere in the classroom (Ainslie). Wright supports this theory, and he also claims that there is a strong connection between a good classroom atmosphere and having good behaviour 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 (Hess, 2001). Anxiety can be a barrier for some students according to Brown (2002). Students can be afraid of making mistakes when they write or talk because of the fear of being laughed at.

According to Lessow-Hurley (2003) 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. (Bowman, 1992)

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 (Bowman, 1992).

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 (Tomlinson, 1999).

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 (Tomlinson, 1999). Brown (2002) and Supple (1990) 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 (1974) and Hess (2001).

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. Hess (2001) stresses the importance of letting the students monitor their work and their progress by for example using checklists of what to do. Teaching, of course, ultimately depends on the willingness of the student to learn: unless the learner takes some responsibility in the shape of active cooperation and effort, there will be no learning in spite of the efforts of excellent teachers (Hess, 2001, p 159). 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 (Shank, 1995).

Goldstein (1998) claims that helping the students plan their work and develop study skills is a good way to increase the students' responsibility for their own learning, which should be the goal for the teacher to attain. Letting the students gradually develop responsibility builds up their self esteem, and in this process it is important for the teacher to give encouragement and positive feedback. Giving clear instructions 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 (Kelly, 1974).

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 (Dörnyei, 2001). 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 (Baker, 2000). Motivation and differentiation According to Leiding (2002) the students' own interests and experiences, their own ideas and emotions should be considered when planning lessons. Much research has been done on the importance of taking advantage of these aspects: Teachers' insistence on attending to students' experiences, interests, and prior knowledge was once thought to result from a disregard for scientific methods. Now, however, these considerations are supported by cognitive research demonstrating that learning is a process of making meaning out of new or unfamiliar events in light of familiar ideas or experiences (Leiding, 2002,. To use activities that are student-centred is one of the solutions to dealing with mixed-ability teaching, according to Berry and Williams (1992). The content needs to be relevant for the students, and it needs to be linked to the tasks. This can be done by letting them express their own ideas and describe their own experiences when talking and writing.

The teacher should connect what has been worked with to their experiences by asking them to put themselves in the situation they read about, heard or watched. This gives meaning to the task because it concerns the students more directly (Tomlinson, 1999). Hess (2001) stresses the importance of students sharing their opinions and relating to their own experiences but also the

need for them to share their future plans. Hess argues that it is important to incorporate open-ended questions which relate to what each student thinks about a specific situation, event and so on. Dörnyei (2001) claims that it is vital for the teacher to show his/her own positive attitude and enthusiasm for what they teach: "...enthusiasm for one's specialisation area and the ability to make this enthusiasm public rather than hiding it is one of the most important ingredients of motivationally successful teaching" (p 33). Green (2000) mentions the use of computer tasks to increase motivation, for example programs where students can practice grammar, vocabulary but also using a computer to write letters, emails and finding information, and other exercises. "Much has been written about its potential for motivating pupils, especially the less able..." (p67).

According to Goldstein (1998), asking questions before the reading and by using titles, pictures and so on to get the students to discuss what they think a text is about, encourages students when they are going to work with it. This method improves their understanding, and it gets the students engaged in thinking about reading. Differentiation plays a big part in solving how to motivate the students, according to Tomlinson (1999) and Kelly (1974). Tomlinson (1999) argues that differentiation is needed in three areas of teaching: the material, the process and the product. The material can be differentiated by using articles, short stories, films, radio programs, plays, songs, poems etc. The process means how the students work with the material and can be differentiated by using whole class discussions, pair work, group work, individual work etc. The product includes the way the student show what they have learned, for example through a test or different kinds of presentations etc.

Tomlinson claims that students cannot learn if they are unmotivated as they then feel it is inaccessible. We learn more when what is taught connects to our interests and our own way of learning. Ainslie (1994) and Wright (2005) also agree with the view that differentiation is important in mixed-ability classes. One key to a good differentiated classroom is to occasionally include the students in the choice of their topics and the media to work with. As has been previously stated, there are several aspects a teacher needs to think about when working in a mixed-ability class. Bowman (1992) states: "Students are very resourceful. They can create problems or generate solutions, depending on how you engage and maintain their attention" (p23). Therefore it is very important how the teacher acts toward his/her students and what atmosphere is promoted.

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