

УДК 81'.355:811.111

**TEACHING STRATEGIES IN MIXED ABILITY GROUPS*****I. D. Garus***

*The article summarises the teaching strategies in mixed ability groups. Mixed ability groups as used in ELT usually refers to the differences that exist in a group in terms of different levels of language proficiency. The differences which cause problems in heterogeneous classes (language learning ability, learning experience, mother tongue, cultural background, preferred learning style, motivation) are discussed. It is of vital importance to find activities that involve all the students without some getting bored and others being confused and discouraged into the process of learning. Thus, teachers need to have a range of strategies for managing mixed ability classes.*

**Key words:** *mixed ability groups, heterogeneous classes, motivation, cultural background, linguistic and non-linguistic strengths, scientific intelligence.*

Many teachers are extremely worried about the fact that they have students in their classes who are at different levels of proficiency. Indeed, mixed-ability classes are a major preoccupation for most of us because they appear to make planning - and the execution of plans in lessons - extremely difficult. Many teachers see mixed-ability classes as especially problematic. Yet in a real sense all classes have students with a mixture of different abilities and language levels. We know this to be true given what we said about multiple intelligences and differing primary perceived systems. And it is inconceivable that any two students will have exactly the same knowledge of English at any one time. Even if we were able to assemble a class of complete beginners, it would soon be clear that some were learning faster than others - or learning different things. Thus, the aim of the given paper is to designate the problems in the mixed ability classrooms and comment on what the reactions of English teachers towards them should be.

So teachers are faced with individuals who have different language knowledge, different intelligences, different learning speeds, and different learning styles and preferences. There is particular concern for the needs not only of students who are having difficulty at the lower end of the scale, but also for 'gifted' children.

The response to this situation is to view the teacher's role with a group in terms of *differentiation*. In a differentiated classroom there are a variety of learning options designed around students' different abilities and interests. We may, for example, give different students different tasks. Perhaps we could give them different things to read or listen to. We could respond to them differently, too, and group them according their different abilities.

One way of working with students at different levels and with different needs is to provide them with different material, tailoring what we give them to their individual needs. Thus, for example, we might give student A a text from an English language newspaper about a certain topic. Student B might be directed to a website on the same topic but where the information is not so dense. Student C might look at a simplified reader on the topic, and we might provide Student D with a short text that we ourselves have written on the subject, written such a way as to be comprehensible to them. In this way, all the students are working at their own individual levels.

One way of offering different content is to allow students to make choices about what material they are going to work with. For example, we can offer them a range of possible grammar or vocabulary exercises and they can choose which ones they want to do. If we wish them to read outside the class, we will encourage them to choose which books they want to read since when they make their choice - rather than having books chosen for them - they are far more likely to read with enthusiasm.

If we cannot offer students different materials, we can, instead, get to do different things in response to the content they are all looking at or listening to.

We might ask all students to look at the same reading text, but make a difference in terms of the tasks we ask them to do in response to that text. Group A, for example, might have to interpret the information in the text by reproducing it in graphic form (say in charts and tables). Group B, on the other hand, might answer a series of open-ended questions. Group C - the group we perceive as having the greatest need of support - might be offered a series of multiple-choice questions ; their task is to pick the correct response from two or more alternatives because we think this will be easier for them than having to interpret all the information themselves. We might give students different roles within

a task. If students are doing a role-play, for example, in which a police officer is questioning a witness, we might give the student playing the police officer the questions they should ask, whereas the student playing the witness has to come up with their own way of expressing what they want to say. We will have done this because the student or students playing the police officer need more guidance than the others. Very often all the students are doing the same tasks with the same content, some may finish earlier than others. We need to be able to offer such students extension tasks to reward their efforts and challenge them further.

In mixed ability classes some students don't seem to 'catch on' as quickly as the others. It is not likely that all 25 students will be able to understand a new structure at the same time because individual students bring to the lesson a range of experience and different areas of knowledge. Perhaps some students have learnt this structure elsewhere before or perhaps others find it hard to hear the explanation or others find it difficult to be engrossed in the task. The fact that some students, and these may be different ones each time, do not 'catch on' as quickly as some others means that the teaching approach we adopt and the pace we work at have to cater for these differences.

Ability grouping is a possible way to differentiate activities. Groups of weaker and stronger students separated from each other are given different tasks. So the stronger and quicker students work with the teacher as a group member supporting them and providing additional instruction and guidance. The teacher would then give each group a series of questions, based on each group's appropriate level of linguistic readiness, related to the objectives of the lesson. If students know why they are doing something they become more confident. Many students do tasks without fully understanding why they are doing them. Spending a few minutes at the beginning of a unit asking them to pick out some grammar or vocabulary tasks or tasks which require more accuracy than fluency or vice versa will encourage confidence. The more choice students have over the kinds of task they do to practise new grammar or vocabulary, the more likely they will be to feel confident about their own learning.

The technique of working through group assignments, becomes a very important weapon in the armory of the teacher of a mixed ability class.

The ways to help weaker students are: to give clear instructions using gestures, to make sure they understand the task, to allow thinking time

and making notes before speaking activities, to reduce the word limit in productive activities, to pre-teach vocabulary using visual aids, to allow using dictionaries within reading comprehension tasks, not to overcorrect their mistakes to avoid discourage.

It is essential for teachers to monitor students by conducting talking to them to reach their needs in a variety of ways and consequently to achieve effective teaching. Students' involvement in the process of the establishing whole-class and individual goals makes these goals more attractive. It is important to give students the opportunity to express their ideas, feelings and experiences by personalizing the tasks. Though they may lack confidence or enough language knowledge, students have an area of strong interest that can be made the focus of their program. Making interest-based learning choice obviously promotes the comfort and confidence of the students and enables a learner to explore some area in depth and in ways that uniquely interest him/her. Actually, such a comprehensive discovery oriented project can be a useful option when any student wants to learn a great deal more about a topic. Knowing students' personalities helps the teacher to prepare and adapt materials based on a meaningful context for all learners in order to make them relevant to students as individuals, which adds variety to the classroom environment and establishes a positive atmosphere.

A mixed ability class should offer all the students an appropriate challenge to help them to progress in their own terms. It is usually necessary for the educator to evaluate and adapt the materials providing activities to respond to the diverse student needs. The intent in doing so during some parts of a lesson is to make a task more achievable. Activities applying to different levels can be assigned at the beginning of a lesson, during group activities, or during individual assessment. Adapting activities to two or three different levels of linguistic difficulty enables the student to choose a more or less challenging version at which he/she can function so that they perform to their maximum potential. These are some ideas how we can differentiate assignments: filling gaps- multiple choice, writing a letter- filling missing words into a letter, describing pictures- pictures accompanied by a wordlist ,persuasive writing- informative writing, unprepared speaking- prepared speaking ,free writing- modeled writing, sentence transformation- word ordering, etc.

Teachers should identify students' strengths (linguistic or non-linguistic): one of the ways we can make a virtue of different student abilities is to include tasks which do not necessarily demand linguistic brilliance but instead allow students to show off other talents they have. Students who are good artists, for example, can lead the design of a poster or wall chart. A student with developed scientific intelligence may be asked to explain a scientific concept before students are asked read a science-based text. If students have special knowledge of contemporary music, we can ask them to select pieces to be played while groupwork takes place. These examples are ways of giving individual students a chance to be 'best' at something, even where they might be weaker, linguistically, than some of their colleagues. As a matter of fact, during lessons we frequently have to respond to students, give them feedback about how they are doing, or acting as a resource or tutor. In such circumstances we always try to tailor our response to the particular individual we are dealing with. Some students are more sensitive than others, and so will correct them with more care than their more robust colleagues. Some students need to see things in order to be able to respond to them, whereas others respond better by having things explained to them orally.

When students are working in pairs or groups and we are monitoring their progress, we will react to them depending on how well they are getting on. Students who are experiencing difficulty may need us to help them clear up some problems we might have to correct some language use, or help them to organise information logical for example. But we can also push the higher achieving groups to go further by asking them how they might say something more effectively, or suggesting an extension to what they are doing. This kind of flexible response is one of the main aspects of differentiation. However, we need to make sure that in spending time with particular groups we do not ignore or exclude others.

A big danger for students in mixed-ability classes is that some of them may get left behind or may become disengaged with what is happening. If we spend a lot of time with the higher-level students in a class, the students who are less linguistically able may feel that they are being ignored and become demotivated as a result. If, on the other hand, we spend all our time with students who we think need our help more than others the higher-level students may feel neglected and unchallenged.

Such students can quickly lose interest in the class and develop an attitude which makes them difficult to work with.

The skill of a mixed-ability teacher is to draw all of the students into the lesson. When setting a task with the whole group (perhaps by asking initial questions to build a situation), teachers will want to start by working at a level that all of the students comfortable with. She will ask questions that all the students can understand and relate to so that their interest is aroused and so that they all understand the goal they are aiming for. Once they are all involved with the topic or the task, she may allow for differentiation in any of the ways we have discussed above. But her initial task is to include and engage everyone - because students who *feel* they are excluded will soon start to behave as if they *are* excluded!

In order to solve the problems of mixed ability, teaching should appeal to all senses, all learning styles and all intelligences (linguistic, logical, visual, kinesthetic, rhythmic, intrapersonal, interpersonal and natural), developed by an American psychologist Howard Gardner. The variety and mixture of learning styles require the teacher to make use of a multi-sensory approach to choosing tasks in the classroom so the needs of each learner are met.

Open-ended tasks or questions happen to be a powerful language learning tool. In contrast with traditional comprehension exercises they have a variety of possible correct responses instead of a single answer predetermined as being correct by the teacher. Unlike closed exercises such as Yes/No questions, these tasks allow each learner to perform at his/her own level and give them the chance to express themselves.

ESL teachers can choose from a wide range of open-ended activities: writing a letter, ending a story, response to a picture, prediction from titles, finishing sentences with a certain grammatical base, brainstorming, etc.

Games, talk shows, quizzes, competitions, debates, drama hold an important role in ensuring learners' interest in the lesson. Regardless of the differences among the students in terms of language level, they are motivated to use the target language while they are playing a game or participating in a role-play. While playing/debating/competing, attention is focused on the message and fluency instead of the language accuracy, correctness of linguistic forms, so the fear of failure is minimized. Besides, quizzes involving general knowledge might prove useful in mixed ability classes as they are based on learners' general experience

and personality rather than linguistic knowledge therefore participation is encouraged to a greater extent. A certain amount of questions need to involve simple vocabulary and structures in order to ensure fluent language production. This can offer students different ways to learn new content as well as help enhance a student's motivation and skills.

Thus, modifying the content, the process, and the product of the basic curriculum supposed to respond to the diversity of academic needs within mixed ability classes. Variety in the type of working groups, taking into consideration a learner's intelligence preference, leveled materials, choice in presentation formats are differentiated teaching strategies that will make a classroom a welcoming and encouraging place to motivate English language learners, involve all students in the lesson and ensure their progress.

#### Literature

1. Guignon, A. (1998) Multiple Intelligences: A Theory for Everyone. - [Електронний ресурс] [http://www.education-world.com/a\\_curr/curr054.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr054.shtml)
2. Harmer, J. (2007) The Practice of English language Teaching. Pearson Education Limited. p. 125-137.
3. Kelly, A.V. (1978) Mixed Ability Grouping. London: Harper & Row Publishers.
4. Kluth, P. (2005) *Differentiating Instruction: 5 Easy Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms*. - [Електронний ресурс]: <http://www.paulakluth.com/articles/diffstrategies.html>
5. Montgomery Country Public Schools. (2005) Instructional and Management Strategies. - [Електронний ресурс]: <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/enriched/giftedprograms/instructionalstrategy.shtml>
6. Prodromoy L. (1989) The mixed-ability class and the bad language learner. English Teaching Forem, 27/4, p. 2-8.

### СТРАТЕГІЇ ВИКЛАДАННЯ В РІЗНОРІВНЕВИХ ГРУПАХ

*І.Д. Гарус*

*У статті розглядається проблема стратегій викладання англійської мови у різнорівневих групах. Термін «різнорівневі групи» використовується у методиці викладання англійської мови і пов'язаний з такими відмінностями, які існують у студентів, виходячи із різних рівнів володіння предметом. Відмінності, які викликають проблеми у гетерогенних групах (здібності до вивчення іноземної мови, навчальний досвід, особливості будови рідної мови, культурні зв'язки, преференційні стилі навчання, мотивація) розглядаються у статті. Дуже важливо знайти такі види діяльності, які б могли сприяти*

залученню студентів, які навчаються до освітнього процесу, при цьому зберігаючи інтерес до навчання одних та надихаючи до праці інших. Таким чином, викладачам необхідно мати низку стратегій для проведення занять у групах з різними рівнями мовленнєвої компетенції.

**Ключові слова:** *різномірівневі групи, гетерогенні групи, мотивація, культурні зв'язки, лінгвістичні і нелінгвістичні особливості, науковий інтелект.*

## СТРАТЕГИИ ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ В РАЗНОУРОВНЕВЫХ ГРУППАХ

**И.Д. Гарус**

*В статье рассмотрена проблема стратегий преподавания английского языка в разноуровневых группах. Термин «разноуровневые группы» используется в методике преподавания английского языка и связан с теми различиями, которые существуют у студентов, владеющих иностранным языком на разных уровнях. Различия, которые вызывают проблемы в гетерогенных группах (способности к изучению языка, учебный опыт, строение родного языка, культурные связи, преференцированные стили обучения, мотивация) рассматриваются в статье. Очень важно найти такие виды деятельности, которые могли бы способствовать вовлечению обучаемых в образовательный процесс, при этом сохраняя интерес к обучению одних и вдохновляя на работу других. Таким образом, преподавателям необходимо иметь ряд стратегий для ведения занятий в группах с разными уровнями речевой компетенции.*

**Ключевые слова:** *разноуровневые группы, гетерогенные группы, мотивация, культурные связи, лингвистические и нелингвистические особенности, научный интеллект.*

**Гарус І.Д.** – старший викладач кафедри англійської мови Східноукраїнського національного університету імені Володимира Даля (м. Луганськ, Україна).

**Garus I.D.** – Senior Lecturer of the Chair of English Language of the Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University (Luhansk, Ukraine).

*Рецензент – кандидат педагогічних наук, доцент Хижняк О.В.*

*Reviewer – Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor Khyzhnyak O.V.*