Working with Multilevel Classes

ONE OF THE greatest challenges faced by both novice and experienced teachers alike is working with classes of mixed ability levels. However, just about any group of learners is mixed to some extent. Either they have different skill levels, they learn at different speeds, or their motivation to learn varies. In programs with limited resources, this problem can be compounded by the need to serve a large group of learners or by the practice of putting learners of different ability levels in the same class (Shank & Terrill, 1995).

Many teachers simply try to "teach to the middle" in this kind of situation. This solution is rarely satisfactory because it is difficult to keep the more advanced level learners engaged, while not losing the lower-level learners. All too often, the result of teaching to some middle level is that the teacher winds up losing a good percentage of his/her class, sometimes with disastrous results (*Saldana,* 2005).

However, there are a number of strategies that a teacher can employ in such a situation. It is important to know your learners and their relative levels to decide which strategies to use and how to proceed with them. It may be very useful to come up with a list of students and their relative levels to decide how to group them. For example, you may have an "A" group of learners at the highest level, a "B" group of learners at the middle level, and a "C" group of learners who are at the lowest level. This list will prove useful when you divide your learners into groups to do activities, particularly if you have a large class.

It is also important to consider learners' various ability levels while planning your lesson and to adapt the activities to appropriate levels of difficulty. Often the best way to approach this is to use the same basic material as a source and adapt the related activities to several levels so that each student is doing an assignment appropriate to his or her level. This practice is often known as "differentiated instruction" (*Saldana,* 2005). "Teachers can use a variety of techniques and grouping strategies and a selection of self-access materials to help all learners be successful, comfortable, and productive for at least a portion of each class time" (Shank & Terrill, 1995).

Having the learners work as a **whole class** will be useful for warm ups, wrap-ups, and large projects. It is also often an effective strategy to present new material to the entire class before breaking them into smaller groups to complete follow-on assignments (Shank & Terrill, 1995).

Small groups may be the most useful configuration in working with mixed-ability classes. There are several different grouping strategies that you can employ. The first is to place the learners into mixed-level groups and give each group a different project or assignment to complete. Your learners can be strategically placed in groups so that they have complimentary skills and levels, as is often done in cooperative learning. At the end of the assignment, each group should report back to the class on their completed project.

Another way to organize groups is to divide the students by level and then, using the same source material, give each group a different assignment appropriate to their level. For example, if the material is a video, a lower level group might be asked simple true/false questions about the content. The middle level group might be assigned to answer questions that require longer, more involved answers. Finally, the advanced group might be given more open-ended discussion questions to answer. The important thing is to meet each learner in his or her area of need (Hubbard, 1983).

Having **pairs of learners** work together is advantageous in that it gives each learner the maximum opportunity to practice using his or her English in a communicative way (Shank & Terrill, 1995). Like group work, the pairs can be either equal or mixed in terms of ability level. Like levels should have interchangeable roles, as in an information gap activity. Mixed levels work best when the higher-level student has a tutoring role.

For a more individualized approach, you can assign each learner a reading, for example, and come up with a set of tasks in ascending order of difficulty, from simple true/false questions to complicated discussions that involve interpretations or presenting and defending a point of view. These tasks can be printed out on pre-prepared index cards. The students should be given a set amount of time to finish the activity. As they finish each task, they can be given the next card with the task at the next level of difficulty. In that way, the more advanced learners will quickly complete the lower-level tasks (which will also serve as a warm-up) and move on to the higher ones, while the lower-level learners will have the time that they need to complete the tasks which are appropriate to them (Hubbard et. Al., 1983).

As you can see, mixed level groups require a great deal of thoughtful planning on the part of the teacher. However, the problem can be overcome to provide a satisfying learning experience for the students at all levels.

FURTHER READING

Online

Saldana, C. "Differentiating Instruction for a Multilevel Class" in Focus on Basics, Volume 7, Issue C, March 2005. Available from: http://www.ncsall.net/?id=735

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Harmer, J. (2007). *How to Teach English, new ed.* Essex: Pearson/Longman

Hubbard, P. et. Al. (1983). *A Training Course for TEFL.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Virginia Adult Education and Literacy Centers. (1998). *The ESL Starter Kit.* Richmond: Virginia Commonwealth University. An electronic version of this document can be downloaded from: http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED431339