

Working with mixed-ability groups

Edmund Dudley has some ideas for helping with this frequent scenario.

The prospect of teaching a mixed-ability class makes many teachers feel anxious. Handling a room full of students with different needs, strengths, personalities and language levels can be extremely challenging. At times, we might catch ourselves thinking, 'If only the students were more alike! The lessons would be so much easier ...' Of course, this presumes that it is possible to find groups of students who have similar levels of proficiency, identical learning needs, and shared interests and strengths.

Anyone who has ever taught a group of streamed students will have come to a very different conclusion. Even if a pre-course placement test indicates that 'this is a solid B1 group' or 'they are all complete beginners', as soon as teaching begins, we come to realise that the differences between students are as great and diverse as their supposed similarities in language level.

Placement tests can provide us with valuable information, but they cannot create homogeneous classes. For one thing, even two learners who – on paper at least – are 'at the same level' will inevitably have different learning strengths and noticeable preferences for certain aspects of learning the language. Does the perennially silent student who excels in writing *really* have the same language-learning needs as a brilliantly communicative speaker whose written assignments are full of inaccuracies? Of course not. The fact of the matter is, as Scrivener (2005: 69) points out: 'Every learner has an individual range of levels. Every class is a mixed-level class.'

Once we have acknowledged this fact, we can set about the business of making the learning experience rewarding for all. To do this, we first need to adopt a positive and constructive attitude towards the situation ourselves. This means embracing the diversity rather than trying to fight it. It also means moving away from the unhealthy tendency to label students based on ability criteria.

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As Prodrinou (1992: 1–5) has noted, the 'myth of the bad learner' is a pervasive one, and one that can be exacerbated by grouping students according to ability. The labelling of students as 'stronger' or 'weaker' is a direct result of comparing their learning outcomes to one another, and can lead to entrenched views about the capabilities of individual students, which can then be hard to shake. Teachers are not the only ones who are prone to pigeon-holing students in this way, either: students themselves often have a clear sense of where they feel they stand in the class 'pecking order'. Measuring one student's progress and achievements against another's is, however, ultimately counterproductive. Boaler *et al* (2000: 645) point out that ability grouping 'creates... academic success and failure through a system whereby students "have to be that good" or they "have to be that bad".'

A far more sensible alternative is to encourage students to set personal goals for their own learning, based on their own needs and strengths, and bearing in mind their current level of proficiency. Rather than always viewing their own progress in comparison to others in the group, students should be encouraged to focus instead on their own progress, noticing ways that they have improved and identifying areas they still need to work on. Getting students to frame individual learning goals for the term ahead, and then sitting down with them to review these individual goals is the best way to achieve such an objective. There is also no reason why students cannot be given extra credits for achieving their own individual



goals when it comes to end-of-term assessment. If, for example, an end-of-term test is administered to students as standard, then a proportion of the final grade can be calculated on the basis of personal goal achievement.

Students are unlikely to fulfil their goals, however, if they are unable or unwilling to take part in the activities of the lesson. Designing tasks and activities in order to make them as appealing and accessible as possible is a must. Differentiated learning can be an effective principle on which to base materials design for mixed-ability groups. The key to effective differentiated learning is ensuring that the students are allowed to tackle language learning tasks in a variety of ways. Traditionally, this might involve asking learners to respond to the same prompt in different ways (e.g. by providing each student with the same input text, but assigning a range of tasks that involve responding to the text in different ways – by writing, answering questions, underlining key words, drawing, etc.); alternatively, all the students in the class might be asked to produce similar outcomes but in response to differentiated input material (e.g. to solve the same ‘whodunnit’ murder mystery based on identical – but linguistically differentiated – information).

There are a couple of key points to emphasise when it comes to tasks such as these. Firstly, ‘differentiated learning’ does not necessarily require masses of preparation on the part of the teacher. Instead, think ‘open-ended’. Few teachers

have the time or energy to prepare multi-level worksheets for every activity, but as long as a degree of open-endedness is incorporated into a task, students can be given opportunities to respond to prompts using language appropriate to their level. Secondly, research indicates that students *really enjoy* opportunities to think creatively and express their own ideas in the context of open-ended tasks (Boaler *et al*, 2000).

If our aim is to motivate all students in a mixed-ability setting, then providing students with open-ended tasks is only one part of the equation. We also need to make sure that we really *pay attention* to the ideas and opinions that are expressed by the students, not just the language that is used to express them. A thoughtful response to a student’s comment is one of the clearest ways to demonstrate respect, which in turn can boost self-esteem and enhance motivation.

So what happens if students do not have the language at their disposal to express their ideas in English? Is it the teacher’s job to provide the language that is needed? Not necessarily. Precisely one of the strengths of working in mixed groups is that it creates opportunities for peer-teaching and peer-learning. Getting students to work together can be hugely beneficial – and not only from a language-learning perspective. Co-operation between students essentially involves seeking help from your peers when you need it, and sharing useful knowledge with others when you have it.

And the ‘knowledge’ in question does not always have to relate to the target language. Typically, different students will have different strengths: some will know more language, others will have original ideas, others might have relevant background knowledge at their disposal, others may well be great artists. An effective mixed-ability task is one that incorporates and rewards a wide variety of different skills and abilities, both linguistic and non-linguistic. Consider, for example, a small group of mixed-level learners working on the open-ended task of designing a presentation to promote a new healthy soft drink. The task involves a whole range of activities: discussion, decision-making, research, writing, designing simple graphics, perhaps even shooting a video using a mobile phone. The broadness of the task allows each learner to make a valid individual contribution, but it also requires them to combine their talents: only by co-operating – by working together and helping each other – can they complete the task the way they wish. Rather than combining so-called ‘stronger’ and ‘weaker’ learners, what we are actually doing is providing ways for all learners to reveal their strengths – and have them validated.

It takes time to establish co-operative working methods, and not all students are initially happy about it. Not surprisingly, the students who usually put up most resistance to co-operative learning are the so-called ‘stronger’ learners. Old habits are hard to shake, and for competitive students, giving help and sharing information can, at first, feel like cheating. The biggest problem with the traditional ‘pecking order’, ultimately, is that by promoting self-centred instincts it makes everyone feel insecure. Once students see that co-operation is neither a threat to their status nor a drag on their learning, however, their opinion about it tends to change.

The benefits of co-operation are substantial and well documented. A spirit of co-operation promotes learning, and can also reinforce the self-esteem of all learners in the group, as well as strengthen the cohesion of the group as a whole. Hadfield (1992: 10) states that a spirit of cooperation and harmony

between group members is 'fundamental' to the success of pair-work and group-work activities, while Dörnyei (2001: 43) points out that creating a strong sense of group cohesion can lead to higher levels of motivation, an increased sense of shared responsibility, and can transform the learning process into something that is more enjoyable for all.

And what is being learnt in such activities goes beyond mere language. The classroom is as much a social arena as it is an academic one. Students not only need to be able to work with the language; they need to be able to interact effectively with the others in the room. That includes learning how to find common ground with others and to tolerate differences of opinion – exactly the kinds of skills that are needed in the workplace and in life in general.

Teaching a mixed-ability group is never going to be a straightforward process, of course. Catering to the needs and preferences of different students requires hard work, and there is considerable

effort involved in thinking about the needs of the class, planning appropriate open-ended activities, producing suitable materials and managing group-work skilfully. Inevitably, our students will experience doubts and frustration along the way. That's when we need to flex what Smith and Lambert (2008) refer to as 'the muscle of positivity', providing encouragement and empathy in equal measure. Open-ended prompts, a whole-person approach and an emphasis on co-operation have real and tangible benefits when it comes to working with mixed-ability groups. The self-esteem that comes from being a valued member of a group, the satisfaction that comes from learning based on co-operation, and the success that comes from meeting one's own personalised goals can all combine to give students the motivation they often lack, and the sense of validation that they all need.

Who knows? Maybe one day a common complaint from teachers will be, 'If only the students were more different. The lessons would be so much easier ...'

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