WHAT STRATEGIES WOULD BE EFFECTIVE TO HANDLE MIXED-ABILITY STUDENTS IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of education is not just to give students beneficial information but to teach them thinking skills, to make decisions and choices, to develop their mental abilities. Educators should stir pupils' curiosity, creativity and imagination; broaden their horizons; deepen their way of thinking, enrich their outlook and scope of knowledge. However, every pupil has own potential. They learn or figure out something according to their character, learning style or even gender. This type of class is called mixed-ability class. The purpose of this paper is to explore teaching mixed-ability students in educational establishments.

Keywords: mixed-ability students, teachers, heterogeneous, classroom, method, activity.

Mixed-ability can refer to classes in which there are clear differences in language level, learning style, learning speed, aptitude, students' background knowledge, and motivation. In this context, every student who is learning a language can be different in language level among other students. Thus, students may have different capabilities to grasp the lesson during the teaching process in the class. According to Ireson & Hallam (2001), "teachers need to recognize that a class is a mixed ability because children have different strengths and weaknesses and develop at different rates."

In Indonesia, English is a foreign language which is taught and learned only in classrooms or additional English courses outside school. In this case, students may have some problems such as less proficient English ability because people in Indonesia rarely use English as a tool of communication. Also, teachers in dealing mixed-ability classes may have an ineffective learning classroom from both students and teachers.

Dealing with this issue, Mixed-ability students have their own learning style and preferences in learning a language. In this context, I would like to have your opinion of the following question:

What strategies would be effective to handle mixed-ability students in learning English as a foreign language?

First of all, the teacher should do a whole class-mingles in a heterogeneous groups, so all students of different ability interact bearing in mind the peer pressure that it is efficient for students' learning. Second the teacher may differentiate objectives to cater for all the students needs in class and then the teacher differentiate tasks and activities accordingly.

In differentiating tasks/activities, the teacher can create a class layout in a way that students of mixed abilities can sit together in a way that middle achieving students can help low achieving students and high achieving students can work alone and assign to them challenging tasks. A possible option for advanced students is to be involved in the presentation of the new lesson themselves. Thus, they can express their own understanding of the discussed topic, help with their explanations to slower working students, and motivate them as well as themselves for further improvement in the specific field of knowledge.

Always have a range of follow-up activities for stronger students, who may be paired together, which they can complete while lower level students are still working on initial activities. Stronger students may welcome more autonomy, but they also need to feel they are learning something from the lesson, even while you may be occupied with further explanation to lower level students.

How to Teach Mixed-Ability Classes

- Structure your lessons so that activities have more open-ended possibilities
- Create ongoing activities
- Use level-specific material
- Communicate equally with the whole class
- Use positive pair-work.

Mixing learners with different abilities can work. This would allow even those weaker ones to learn from those who are fluent. Language is learned through interactions and that's how best learners can learn. The oral approach has as its target communication in a second language in real-life situations, and the language acquisition starts with an oral phase (the length of time depends on the learners' age and the intensity of learning); the integrative approach emphasizes that mechanical learning is the more effective one in studying languages up to the age of puberty (repetition of utterances in the foreign language) while later the cognitive approach, based on the understanding of the functioning of language rules, brings greater success; the multi-medial approach stresses the use of every media that aids the development of communicative skills, while adherents of functional approach point out that the most important thing in professional training is to lay stress upon the future function of the language that the students are learning.

Glottodidactics synthesizes the knowledge of many sciences on the issue of successful language teaching and serves as a basis for various language – teaching methodologies. These methodologies have always been influenced by the views of psychology concerning the goals of education and the process of speech development. Consequently, the earlier methods based on teaching grammar and translation were predominant at the time when the goals of education were deduced from a theory of transfer called the theory of formal disciplines. (Theories of transfer give instructions on how to organize practice in order to benefit from the experience gained through it, see Helfenstein, 2005). The emphasis of this theory is on the fact that working strenuously on a difficult material can develop the psychical functions, and grammar is very suitable for this purpose. The student, in fact, does not acquire applicable knowledge (communicative competence in the other language) but extends his/her capacities. The direct method of language teaching starts from the presumption that the process of the first language acquisition is repeated while learning a second language1 and this is what makes the second language learning efficient in a foreign language environment.

The goal in this case is efficient communication. Audio-lingual and audio-visual methods, on the other hand, are based on the assumption that the process of language development is simultaneous with the acquisition of habits. These two methods rest on the transfer theory of identical components, which claims that applicable knowledge (in this case the use of language in real situations) can be gained if there is an overlap between the elements in the situation of practice and real-life situations. Audio-lingual and audio-visual methods in foreign language teaching are based upon similar mechanisms: the learner repeats utterances imitating real communicational situations spoken in the target language - preferably by a teacher who speaks the language at the level of a native speaker - until they become automatized. In the meantime, he or she is praised, and this praise is reinforced in the sphere of experiences in the form of positive inner conditioning by the feeling of satisfaction. According to the principles of the psychology of learning, behaviour followed by positive consequences is reinforced and turns it into a habit. This, at the same time, is proof of the fact that psychological knowledge related to speech has constant influence on ideas concerned with language teaching or language learning. So, it can be seen that changes in the aims of education also bring about changes in the methods of language teaching. Today, we can no longer speak of a single dominant method of language teaching but rather about the approach to the language learned, and this enables us to deduce methods that use a variety of teaching techniques. Approach to a language indicates what our views on language as a system is, and what the function of the language is in a given community or within a type of school. This is what decides about the method that determines the

tasks of both the teacher and the learners, and this makes it possible through adequate language material and concrete techniques for the goals of teaching to be accomplished. There are at least four kinds of dominant approaches to language learning (among several others). The oral approach has as its target communication in a second language in real-life situations, and the language acquisition starts with an oral phase (the length of time depends on the learners' age and the intensity of learning); the integrative approach emphasizes that mechanical learning is the more effective one in studying languages up to the age of puberty (repetition of utterances in the foreign language) while later the cognitive approach, based on the understanding of the functioning of language rules, brings greater success; the multi-medial approach stresses the use of every media that aids the development of communicative skills, while adherents of functional approach point out that the most important thing in professional training is to lay stress upon the future function of the language that the students are learning

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