

Using Different Methods in Teaching Mixed Ability Classes

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Abstract

The main purpose of the present article is to offer a method of teaching English in classes of mixed ability groups. The method which has drawn from my own teaching experience stresses on a simultaneous focus on both syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of language. While memorizing long lists of new words and teaching grammatical rule are considered boring, it is inevitable for learners to deal with both. There is a lot to be learned in a limited period of time by learners. To ease the problem, reading texts are divided into syntagms of phrasal level. As a pre-reading activity, students are given lists of the syntagms with their meaning in their native language. Employing native language helps create a friendly atmosphere in which students can experience self-esteem while dealing with language of the other. The list is to be reviewed and, to some extent, memorized in a session so that no one would have any problem in pronunciation and grammatical relations within segments. It is a truth that human subject is the center of all linguistic activities. Here, teacher's personality plays a crucial role.

Key words: *differentiated instruction, learning styles, mixed ability classes, multiple intelligences, vocabulary learning*

Though the belief that learners learn differently has now turned to a commonsensical view, notions such as onesize-fits-all instruction based on age-grade groupings, whole-class lecture teaching, and lockstep progress continue to be regarded as the norm even in today's revolutionized pedagogical world (Hess, 1999; Sizer, 1999). Nonetheless, as a glance through a typical classroom setting reveals, invisible diversities of learning characteristics and preferences dominate the ELT practices all over the globe. Some students come to school with little support and encouragements from home, while others commence the learning process, with skills and knowledge years beyond grade level expectations (Tomlinson, 1999). As Caine and Caine (1990) note, "There can be up to a five-year difference in maturation between any two „average“ children" (p. 2). It is important to make a clear distinction between mixed ability teaching and mixed ability classes. Most teachers have to teach mixed ability groups but they not be using mixed ability teaching strategies. McKeown (2004) believes that many teachers see a mixed ability class as consisting of a group of average and able children with a subset of students who has learning problems. Ireson & Hallam (2001) suggest teachers need to recognise that a class is mixed ability because students have different strengths and weakness and develop at a different rates. They have different preferences for learning and displaying their work. A metaphor of a mixed ability class which works is to think of the class as a lift (elevator). Everyone needs to get into the lift to start with. Some students will run into the lift, some will have to dragged in. Some students will travel right to the top of the building, some may stop at the third floor and some may only reach the first floor, but everyone will have travelled somewhere successfully. At the end of class, every student can leave the room feeling that they been challenged and they have achieved something.

A word of warning is to be made, at this juncture, regarding some teachers' misconception regarding the real practice of differentiated instruction, as it is sometimes the case that, on the face of it, the teacher claims to be dealing with differentiation, whereas in actuality s/he does nothing more than tracking the traditional approach. This is evident in a study by Blozowich (2001) who found that teachers used a variety of techniques but continued to prepare lessons as they would for a tracked classroom. This researcher, then, came to the conclusion that teachers implementing differentiated instruction are in dire need of incessant and consistent professional development, along with intensive discussion about how these techniques are to be put to use in the classroom. Among the other supportive claims in favor of the privileges of differentiated instruction, reference can be made to McAdams' (2001) work, which pointed to significant performance enhancement among the students in the Rockwood School District (Missouri), successive to the implementation of differentiated instruction. Planning, mentoring, professional development, doing action research and holding workshops are highlighted in this study as the principal measures to be taken with the aim of lessening teachers' initial resistance toward differentiation in education. In another study concerning the repercussions of adopting differentiated syllabi for teachers, Affholder (2003) found that teachers who made an intensive use of these strategies developed a better individual perception and assumed greater responsibility for student growth. Furthermore, in line with the results of this study, teachers who were characterized by a more frequent utilization of differentiated techniques in their classes came up with higher levels of self-efficacy as well as willingness to try new instructional approaches. Yet, as the results revealed, those enjoying seniority and higher experience were found to be at a more privileged position in this respect. Working with the unique community of undergraduate teachers, Johnsen (2003) concluded that the use of differentiated techniques proved to be a beneficial tool in

keeping the individuals“ interested and, consequently, the implemented techniques were said to have provided the undergraduate teachers with a highly gratifying experience.

List of references

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