

# Teaching Mixed-Ability Students in Educational Establishments

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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..

**Key words:** *foreign language, mixed-ability, learning style, effective learners*

Teaching mixed ability classes is a way of life to many ESL/EFL teachers. Richards (1998) has asserted that "Every class we ever teach is mixed ability" (p.1). In a similar vein, Rinvoluceri (1986) argues that " We do not teach a group, but thirty separate people. Because of this, the problem of mixed abilities in the same room seems absolutely natural, and it is the idea of teaching a unitary lesson that seems odd" (p.17). Therefore, one of the roles teachers should seek to develop is creating a more successful methodological approach to their mixed ability class so that they neither leave the struggling students behind nor fail to engage advanced students. As Casanave (2002) aptly points

out, academic writing poses a “clueless” challenge because the rules of the “game” are almost all implicit (p.19).

Mixed ability classes need more attention from teachers. According to Ireson and Hallam (2001), teachers should understand that a class is multi-level. This is because children have different development rates, such as different strengths and weaknesses. Hedge (2000) stated that teaching a mixed-ability classroom is a critical and real issue that educators and teachers face on a regular basis. While each learner has their own unique approach to learning English, as well as various levels of linguistic expertise and learning pace, there appears to be an overall necessity for the teachers to use approaches that will engage all pupils equally. Teachers must have their own challenges in teaching this mixed ability class, whether of their different understanding, learning styles, motivation, or proficiency level in learning English.

Of all these, textual competence (Bachman, 1990), or the ability to develop and organize their ideas in an academically persuasive manner according to “rules of cohesion and rhetorical organization” (Bachman, 1990, p. 88) constitutes the most formidable and crucial challenge. From our personal experience as classroom teachers, we share with Hayashin’s (2005) observation that students’ writings more often than not end up lacking a clear logical flow and unity, not to mention a persuasive linear argument.

Harris and Snow (2004) express their concern that the drive to raise achievement may have left Modern Languages teachers feeling they should be drawing yet more colourful flashcards or making up differentiated worksheets. They suggest that an alternative approach would be to focus on helping pupils to become more effective learners. They recommend giving pupils more ownership not only in the choice of content but also how they go about learning. This is in keeping with the findings of the HM Inspectors of Education Teaching a mixed ability class will work if all pupils are allowed to experience success and to learn as individuals. It is less likely to be successful if teachers insist on whole class teaching and teaching to the average child. It is unrealistic to expect any group of pupils whatever the ability to work through a body of work at exactly the same pace. Two thirds of pupils will be working out of their learning style unless the type of task is varied. Fisher (2001:1) suggests that many children don’t achieve their potential because they are told “to make a journey but they have no map”. Children cannot overcome blocks to learning if they have not learnt how to learn. Teachers should act as role models for learning and teach pupils how to become independent and effective learners. Pupils need to be taught learning techniques and how to be resourceful.

Michael J. Lawson and Donald Hoban both stress the importance of helping the students to learn different learning strategies so the students can develop their own study skills that work for them, since all students have their own ways of learning. It can be very helpful to allow the students to create their own study guides for a test and so on. A teacher should also promote cooperation and collaboration, according to Kelly and Hess. They further argue that teachers should encourage the students to help each other out, to ask classmates for help and give each other feedback on their work because this improves the students’ ability to take responsibility for their learning. It can be very useful for the weaker students to be provided with self-assess material so the student can follow his/her progress and evaluate how it goes.

Mixed ability is a proposed new term to be used in place of the terms disabled, handicapped, abnormal, and crippled. Mixed ability refers to any person who has a different or mixed physical ability. It can also refer to anyone who has a different emotional or learning ability. Words like

disabled, crippled, and handicapped have negative connotations throughout history. Mixed ability contemporizes the label placed on those who have a different or medically documented physical or mental abilities and attempts to relieve any social or conversational stigma. The objective in changing the term is to eliminate stereotypes that exist currently in any society in regard to those with a mixed ability. Educator Robert Pondiscio has argued that mixed-ability grouping in the classroom creates problems of its own, especially the neglect of higher functioning students. He also points out that "tracking," the practice of grouping students by ability, is routinely used in school sports programs, and questions whether educators are more concerned about athletic achievement than they are about academic achievement.

No matter what age and ability level you are teaching you should always try to promote learning through fun, accommodate different learning styles, have clear classroom management systems in place and aim to be a positive role model. Here are some specific ideas for dealing with each age group

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