

Using Diverse Teaching Approaches in Mixed Ability Classes

Yunusova Zilola ¹

¹ Uzbekistan Journalism Mass Communication University

Abstract:

The main purpose of this article is to propose a method for teaching English in mixed-ability classrooms, drawing from my own teaching experience. This method emphasizes a simultaneous focus on both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of language. Although memorizing long lists of new words and learning grammatical rules can be tedious, they are essential components of language learning. With a limited amount of time available for learners to grasp these concepts, reading texts are divided into syntagms at the phrasal level to facilitate learning. As a pre-reading activity, students receive lists of these syntagms along with their meanings in their native language. Utilizing the native language helps create a supportive environment where students can build self-esteem while engaging with the foreign language. This list is reviewed and partially memorized in a session to ensure that students are comfortable with pronunciation and grammatical relations within segments. The teacher's personality is also crucial in this process, as the human element is central to all linguistic activities.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, learning styles, mixed ability classes, multiple intelligences, vocabulary learning.

Despite the widespread acceptance that learners have different learning styles, traditional instructional methods such as one-size-fits-all teaching based on age-grade groupings, whole-class lectures, and uniform progress remain prevalent in today's educational landscape (Hess, 1999; Sizer, 1999). However, a typical classroom reveals a diversity of learning characteristics and preferences that influence English Language Teaching (ELT) practices worldwide. Some students come to school with minimal support and encouragement from home, while others start with skills and knowledge well beyond grade level expectations (Tomlinson, 1999). Caine and Caine (1990) highlight this variability, noting that "There can be up to a five-year difference in maturation between any two 'average' children" (p. 2). This underscores the need for more personalized and

differentiated teaching approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of students. It is crucial to distinguish between mixed ability teaching and mixed ability classes. While most teachers are required to instruct mixed ability groups, they may not necessarily employ mixed ability teaching strategies. McKeown (2004) points out that many teachers perceive a mixed ability class as comprising a group of average and able children with a subset of students who have learning difficulties. Ireson and Hallam (2001) argue that teachers need to recognize that a class is mixed ability because students possess different strengths and weaknesses and develop at varying rates. Additionally, students have diverse preferences for learning and presenting their work. This understanding highlights the importance of adopting teaching strategies that cater to the varied needs of students in a mixed ability classroom. 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 be 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 have been challenged and they have achieved something.

It is important to address a common misconception among some teachers regarding the practice of differentiated instruction. While some educators claim to be implementing differentiation, in reality, they may still be adhering to traditional methods. This issue was highlighted in a study by Blozowich (2001), which found that although teachers employed a variety of techniques, they continued to prepare lessons as if for a traditionally tracked classroom. Blozowich concluded that teachers who are attempting to implement differentiated instruction urgently need continuous and consistent professional development. Additionally, there should be intensive discussions on effectively utilizing these techniques in the classroom. This highlights the need for ongoing training and support to ensure that differentiation is genuinely practiced and beneficial for all students.

Among the various arguments supporting differentiated instruction, McAdams' (2001) study is particularly noteworthy. This research demonstrated significant improvements in student performance in the Rockwood School District (Missouri) after differentiated instruction was implemented. Crucial strategies such as planning, mentoring, professional development, action research, and workshops were identified as essential for overcoming teachers' initial resistance to differentiated education. Similarly, Affholder's (2003) study on the effects of using differentiated curricula revealed that teachers who employed these strategies extensively developed a stronger sense of self-awareness and took greater responsibility for student progress. These findings highlight the importance of supportive measures in facilitating the successful adoption of differentiated instruction and its positive impact on both student achievement and teacher development. Furthermore, in accordance with the study's findings, teachers who frequently employed differentiated techniques in their classrooms reported higher levels of self-efficacy and a greater willingness to experiment with new instructional methods. However, the results also indicated that more experienced and senior teachers were in a more advantageous position regarding these outcomes. Working with a unique group of undergraduate teachers, Johnsen (2003) found that the use of differentiated techniques effectively maintained the individuals' interest. Consequently, these techniques were reported to provide undergraduate teachers with a highly rewarding experience.

Used literature:

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