

# Enhancing Teaching Speaking in Mixed Ability Classes

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## **Abstract:**

Teaching speaking skills in mixed-ability classes presents unique challenges, as students often have varying levels of proficiency, learning preferences, and communication needs. This article explores strategies to enhance speaking instruction in diverse classrooms, emphasizing methods that accommodate a wide range of abilities. Key approaches discussed include the use of differentiated tasks, collaborative group work, and active learning techniques that encourage participation from all students. By incorporating frameworks like Bloom's Taxonomy and providing structured support for autonomous learning, teachers can create a more inclusive and engaging environment for speaking practice. The article also highlights the importance of training teachers as facilitators who adapt lessons to foster students' speaking confidence and responsibility in mixed-ability settings.

**Keywords:** abilities, language learning, speaking.

Most people study a foreign language primarily due to academic requirements and school curricula. Additionally, many pursue language learning to enhance their career prospects, as proficiency in at least one foreign language can lead to more rewarding job opportunities. In today's world, where English is recognized as an international language, having a basic understanding of it is often considered essential. Furthermore, some learners engage in language study for specific purposes, using the language solely for particular contexts without incorporating it into their daily lives.

At the present time a term mixed ability became very popular and widely used. However, nowadays a term "heterogeneous classes" is more preferred as there are not only "abilities" that make difference between students. We can find many sources that explain this term. According to Wikipedia, for example, mixed ability is "a new term to be used in replace of: 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." But all these reasons have something in common. To be successful at language learning students need to be motivated and

therefore motivation is considered to be the most important factor affecting students' success. As motivation is an abstract phenomenon it is difficult to describe it. Generally speaking, it is understood as a drive or a trigger that leads to the following learning and it is one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of learning a foreign language. Jeremy Harmer defines motivation as "an internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue a course of action." (Harmer, 1991, 3).

Teaching a foreign language to children is obviously different from teaching adults. Children do not have the same access as older learners to use a language to talk about a language; in other words, it is needed a secured atmosphere in order to encourage them to become independent and adventurous in the learning of the language (Cameron, 2001: 1; Scott and Ytreberg, 1990: 10). In teaching spoken language to children, the teacher needs to give nonverbal communication to support the intended message. Children are in the stage of here and now in which all five senses need to be stimulated in learning a language (Brown, 2001: 88-89).

Social emotional development is related to children's emotion, attitude, and feelings. They are able to express themselves in showing their feelings such as anger, happiness, or sadness. They use the expression as a response of a thing. Children are excellent in mimics who can distinguish some kinds of expression used in daily communication (Brewster, Ellis, and Girard, 2004: 28). Besides, they are also able to show their curiosity or eagerness when they are interested in certain topic and reject to do something when they do not like the activities (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990: 4). They tend to have activities which offer challenges to them.

Speaking is a productive skill and is used more frequently than writing. Its primary role is to facilitate social interactions. Unlike writing, spoken language is created and interpreted in real-time, giving both speaker and listener limited time to plan, express, and comprehend ideas. Speech typically occurs in face-to-face settings and is temporary, spontaneous, and adaptable. It is often accompanied by body language, including gestures and facial expressions, known as non-verbal communication. A key feature of spoken language is the immediate feedback it allows; listeners can ask for clarification, explanations, or repetitions when something is unclear. Speech is also characterized by varying speeds, false starts, pauses, incomplete sentences, and occasional hesitation.

Naturally, not all students are affected by the above mentioned factors. Basically, it is common for people with low self-esteem and high levels of anxiety, i.e. people experiencing psychological distress in all situations associated with the evaluation of their activities (Phillips, E. 1991).

Teachers often lack sufficient knowledge of classroom strategies to address diverse abilities effectively. While grouping students by ability narrows the range, it doesn't eliminate the fact that each student has unique needs and learning preferences. More training is necessary to equip teachers with skills to accommodate various learning styles. Bloom's taxonomy, for example, can support teachers in creating challenging, differentiated tasks and promoting the social and academic benefits of collaborative group work. Additionally, teachers need training to act as facilitators of learning rather than relying predominantly on whole-class instruction. It's also essential for students to be guided in taking responsibility for their own learning.

Mixed-ability groups pose a specific challenge for teachers aiming to develop speaking skills. For each student who actively engages, there is another who participates minimally; for each one who speaks, there is one who remains silent; for every raised hand, another stays down.

Ideally, goal is to involve every student. In practice, though, when a lesson falls short of expectations, we often adjust our objectives. Unable to engage everyone, we settle for the participation we can achieve. Rather than recognizing that only the more advanced students are involved, we're often just relieved that someone is contributing. This can lead to overlooking the quieter, less confident students who, as a result, are left passively observing the lesson.

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