

## Mixed-ability Groups – A Challenge or an Opportunity in Disguise

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### *Abstract*

Language instructors have always been provoked by a variety of impediments to their students. The present article is based on the author's research, reflections and observations as an experienced language teacher in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP), branch of English Language Teaching (ELT). Success, in terms of language acquisition, is the greatest motivator and as such, considering the multifaceted nature of ELT, we all strive for it. Based on the literature review and the topicality of the problem, the author attempted to devise techniques and highlight principles to help language teachers in their work with mixed-ability groups. Bridging the gap between different linguistic knowledge and pace of learning and shedding light on the strategies that could be utilized in order to engage students to develop their full potential are still pertinent issues addressed in this paper. Adopting new practices can add value to the teaching-learning process without being detrimental to it.

*Keywords:* mixed-ability groups, language teaching, language learning, ESP.

### 1. Introduction

Language instructors have always been provoked by a variety of impediments to their students. At the macro level, sensitizing teachers to the advantages of mixed-ability groups could contribute to the greatest challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> century language teaching – personalized student-centered approach, beneficial to both educators and students. At the micro level, mixed-ability groups have always been the rule rather than the exception, as different learning styles, pace and capacity mark the teaching modality in the heterogeneous class. How to tune the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) group and turn its dissonance into harmony is the question the author tries to address in this article.

University students have different abilities, competencies and backgrounds but they share the same occupational interests. It is the same with the ESP and the General English (GE) class. Although they share the same characteristics and objectives, they are completely diverse in terms of language preparation. Both language instructors and learners respectively differ in their teaching and learning styles. Bridging the gap between different linguistic knowledge and pace of learning and shedding light on the strategies that could be utilized in order to engage students to develop their full potential are still pertinent issues addressed in this paper.

Language teachers constantly face diversity. When a teacher is challenged by a student's deficits of knowledge, the educator is obliged to search for the best ways to assist the learner. That is how new practices are adopted to develop students' cognizant abilities and build on teachers' professional knowledge. This study also reflects on the ways to guide mixed-ability groups towards better learning outcomes as a process with its steps and principles.

## 2. Research questions

The present study attempted to gain insights in the following questions related to teaching and learning ESP in the context of mixed-ability groups:

- (1) Whether to prioritize weak or advanced students in the mixed-ability group?
- (2) How to bridge the gap between weak and strong students in the mixed-ability group?
- (3) How can mixed-ability groups empower language teachers?

## 3. Methods

By employing the keywords “mixed-ability groups,” “blended learning,” “ESP,” “language teaching” and “language learning,” the author conducted literature review of more than 30 articles, based on the search for related to the topic articles in several databases. The primary and the secondary stage resulted in picking out the most relevant 13 articles and 3 books. Data collection also benefited from the observations and the years' experience in language teaching of the researcher.

## 4. Background

When the English teacher faces a class with different levels of linguistic knowledge, the challenge to tackle the problem is accepted. Normally, the demand for simple solutions is not easily addressed but the greatest reward for any instructor is the feeling of a well-organized, harmonious class without any students left behind. Multi-level classes are a difficult task, as they demand excellent managerial and leadership skills in order to implement adaptable methods tailored to the needs of each student in the classroom. In the past, enhancing student's performance was achieved through ability grouping. Nevertheless, Prodromou (1989: 2) points out that student grouping according to their test scores will always result in different progress rates due to the differences in terms of teaching methods, materials and learning styles. Byrne suggests that learning styles can undergo changes over time with students' development or can be mixed with other learning types (Byrne, 1988: 84-111). Another prominent expert at language teaching, Penny Ur, reveals her view on the topic stating that “There is in fact no such thing as a ‘homogenous’ class, since no two learners are really similar; and therefore, all classes of more than one learner are in fact heterogeneous” (Ur, 1991 :302). Harmer sees the heterogeneous group as an opportunity to facilitate teacher's professional growth and development by constantly searching for a relevant methodology in the particular learning context (Harmer, 1991: 77). Stephen Bax is also concerned about deploying certain methods without regard to the learning context and he suggests, “identifying key aspects of that context” to dwell upon in order to decide on how to meet “varied learner needs” (Bax, 2003: 285).

Evoking students' interest and sustaining their engagement is important not only when we step across the classroom threshold but generally in every lesson. Nurturing positive

trainer-trainee attitude to each other also accounts for better learning outcomes. Flexible methodology based on reflective teaching is the key to involve each student in the mix-ability group. Bill Templer realizes that “we need to hold up mirrors to our practice, making us more conscious what is beneath the surface” (Templer, 2004, as cited in Harmer, 1991: Chapter 24, p. 410). Templer’s words are the core of reflective teaching. Being introspective, self-analyzing and reflective can help identify our strengths and weaknesses as teachers. Templer (2004: 2) suggests keeping a classroom journal, which he considers “the best single interactive mirror” – another path to self-development. Language teaching is supposed to be a constant process of change and growth because when students learn, educators learn, too.

Enthusiasm and motivation are contagious in the classroom and the students easily gauge their teacher’s zest and dedication. The concept of leadership refers to the orchestral conductor role of the language teacher, metaphorically speaking (Harmer, 1991: 107). Whether adopting a more autocratic or a more democratic teacher style depends on the instructor’s personality and interpersonal skills. Developing a trainer-trainee relationship and rapport in the classroom would foster balance between the two styles and promote accountability in the mixed-ability class.

## 5. Results and discussion

The data analysis outlined four major trailblazing principles that the author proposes as a hypothesis (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. The 4-principle hypothesis

Taking a more holistic look at language teaching, makes us admit that all the pedagogical principles are interrelated and interdependent. If the four principles are at the four ends of the language classroom plane, balance can be kept only at the complementary presence of three of them. Performing various combinations in succession would lead to success in any aspect of language teaching and efficient language learning.

Diversity, in the language classroom context, can be regarded as the tool to enrich the collaborative environment of the participants. The principle of collaboration is in line with Bekiryazıcı’s views (2015: 914) on “scaffolding” – the supporting structure that gains importance in the mixed-ability class – as a way to reach students’ Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the point where learning occurs. These ideas are generated by Vygotsky who views the ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). Effective “scaffolding” or collaboration can be achieved in the collaborative context when “Different students may have different responsibilities in the same task according to their competencies” (Bekiryazıcı, 2015:

915). Bekiryazıcı goes on suggesting pairing weak in grammar students with students who are stronger in vocabulary to be beneficial for both parties (*Ibid.*: 915). Mixed pairs and group work can also give advantage to the shy students when small roles are delegated to them in roleplaying a dialogue, for example. Knowing the students' abilities and personalities is crucial in this regard. Dedicated teachers are used to “scaffolding” and they implement the technique every day. Those, willing to adopt Vygotsky's ideas, would consider the positive aspects of the mixed-levelled class as diversity prompts a variety of possibilities.

The second principle is Adaptation, which contributes to the dynamics in the mixed-ability group. In the context of the ESP course, picking up materials related to the particular occupational setting brings about sustaining students' interest. Du sheds light on that principle in terms of the choice of teaching language, the design of teaching activities and the use of teaching methods and strategies in line with the mental, social and physical worlds of teachers and students to create dynamic linguistic contexts and accomplish successfully teaching tasks (Du, 2016: 34-35). Du's idea (*Ibid.*: 34) that teachers and learners interact in the process of language choice and adaptation to communicative contexts supports Bax's approach to dethroning methodology in favor of context (2003: 286).

Differentiation, as a teaching principle, sparked from the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered approach with a focus on learner differences. Employing differentiated instruction inevitably raises the question whether this strategy is an empowerment or an impediment. In a recent study, Kamarulzaman, Azman, and Zahidi (2017: 78) found out that differentiated instruction benefits the gifted students. Tomlinson, (as cited by Kamarulzaman, Azman, & Zahidi, 2017: 80), who advocates differentiation ardently, concluded that if learner differences in terms of the learner readiness, interest and learning profile match the pedagogical components (i.e. content, process and product) learner engagement and achievement increase. Although all students have access to the same material, using a variety of techniques results in students' responses at variance according to their learning styles, preferences and capabilities. One of the teacher's aids offering personalized experience is AI. AI-powered technologies are being harnessed in language teaching providing learner's own pace of learning (according to their level), objective instant assessment and feedback. AI can be the teacher's helping hand and a time-saving tool with its various options and techniques. This ingenious technology fully meets today's students' needs. Although it questions teachers' reluctance and willingness to apply it extensively on a regular basis. Moreover, its launch needs language professionals to gain 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and training.

Innovation is another leading principle in the contemporary language classroom. Innovation in language teaching is as essential as evolution in the history of humankind. Serdyukov (2017: 8) views innovation as a three-step process: an idea that needs to be implemented, the subsequent outcome and change as a result. Some time ago, I came upon a catchphrase: “Be smart. Use smartphones in class”. Innovation and technology go side by side in the digital age, but Serdyukov (*Ibid.*:12) considers it to be only a means for the innovative teacher or learner. Overall, transforming the classical methods into new technological types, in line with the current trends, is impossible without the balanced use of information technologies. In this context, “the key words such as wish, responsibility, open-mindedness, eagerness, and dedication clearly show the importance of teachers' professional autonomy if they are expected to move further on the continuum of professional development” (Balçıkanlı & Özmen, 2019: 21). Piloting an interactive live quiz in my ESP classes on the topic of hygiene turned out to be beneficial in terms of arousing students' interest and they all shared the same opinion. On the other hand, it was a new barrier for me to overcome, which is time-consuming and demands a suitable learning environment. Embracing innovation challenges teacher creativity in order to generate effective dynamic learning space. It also enhances student engagement and brings about learner autonomy

in the diversity of the mixed-ability group. Innovation or constant change is what triggers progress and makes the teaching-learning experience a satisfying journey, advantageous to both parties.

The conducted research provided a link between the author's hypothesis and the research questions.

*Research Question 1:* Whether to prioritize weak or advanced students in the mixed-ability group?

Ansari considers the dilemma whether to focus on the more advanced students or ignore the weaker ones (Ansari, 2013: 110). Here comes the role of the instructor to engage the students and rely on tailored to their needs activities to provide a positive atmosphere and ensure that all students reach their full potential in the different-level group. Positive feedback is also crucial and every effort should be praised. Low and high achievers are the parts of the same puzzle as we, as teachers, always try to reach each of our students. Ansari (*Ibid.*: 113) states that "teaching should appeal to all senses, all learning styles and all intelligences", based on a meaningful context for all. Ansari goes on suggesting visuals as a suitable means of attracting attention for all age groups and proficiency levels (*Ibid.*: 113). Starting a lesson with a thematic crossword, a quiz, a riddle or a joke are some of the ways to trigger students' attention, create an amiable learning environment and get the most of the lesson.

*Research Question 2:* How to bridge the gap between weak and strong students in the mixed-ability group?

Hordiienko and Lomakina (2015: 40), in a recent study, found out that teachers find it difficult to balance between fast, average and weaker learners as the latter feel demotivated and inferior. The data yielded in their study provides significant evidence that peer tutoring facilitates the educational process, affects student motivation positively and results in better achievements. Adopting such a groundbreaking strategy is described in scientific literature as successful in the system of higher education (*Ibid.*: 41). Another strategy suggested by Hordiienko and Lomakina (2015: 41) that can be helpful in this regard is the application of the principle of differentiated instruction. Approaching an assignment according to its complexity to be sure that both weak and strong students will cope with it is a guarantee for favorable outcomes. To provoke the more advanced students and to debunk the complexity of the task for the weaker ones is a challenging but achievable endeavor that requires empathy, positivism and leadership skills.

*Research Question 3:* How can mixed-ability groups empower language teachers?

Language teacher roles in blended learning settings can be viewed from the perspective of a problem-solver, a psychologist, a mentor, a motivator and a collaborator to name a few. Professionalism speaks loudly when the teacher subtly blends all these roles. It is a process, the result of experience, competencies and knowledge gained over time. Mixed-ability groups foster creativity and teacher autonomy, boost confidence and provide opportunities for professional growth. As Murray (2010: 3) states, "One of the main reasons to pursue professional development is to be empowered – to have the opportunity and the confidence to act upon your ideas as well as to influence the way you perform in your profession." This way, teaching turns into the art of inspiring and positive change.

## 6. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the basic pedagogical principles that underlie teaching methods are essential contributing factors to a positive classroom atmosphere and student advancement. Adopting new practices can add value to the teaching-learning process without being detrimental to it. Focus should be put on the variety of roles of ESP teachers if we want to plant the seeds of knowledge. Further research should be conducted on the ways of developing

differentiated learning context and materials. Embracing these principles will highlight the building blocks of successful language teaching and learning. At this point, language teaching transforms the learning process and teaches life lessons – to contribute to collective spirit, and respect and value the assets of everyone – skills necessary for either the academic or the social or professional arena.

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