

ELT IN MULTILEVEL CLASSES

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Introduction

There are many classes in our schools which are large and multilevel. Students differ in their abilities, language competence, learning styles, interests, etc. The problem is how to cope with discipline, how to change students' attitudes and develop motivation. Besides, every teacher has to do his best to realise the syllabus and reach the aims like good teaching climate, cooperation, communication, student-centered teaching, etc. The choice of good strategies to teach the English language skills is important and possible.

Key words:

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Can you imagine what teaching a class would look like if all the students were at the same level, of equal ability? I cannot. Teaching such a class would probably be boring even for the teacher.

I agree with Stephanie Richards who says: "Every class we should ever teach is mixed ability." (2004). When we get a class of beginners we expect more or less the same feedback, the same results, etc. Because all the students are being taught the same syllabus, teacher uses the same methods and strategies. But even by the end of the first term it will be apparent that their level of knowledge is far from being equal. It is normal because the teacher's job and expectations mean one thing and students are something different. There are differences among students which teachers should be fully aware of. Children come to school with different experiences and expectations. Their expectations about learning and classroom behaviour are different. That is why, even from the beginning, there will be the differences in their approach, self-discipline, attitude and ability in the classroom. The more students we have in the class, the greater differences among them may appear. Taking these differences into consideration we cannot expect all the students to be able to do the same tasks in the same way at the same time and with the same interest.

If we get students with certain previous knowledge of a foreign language, we should expect even greater level differences. Our classes have been arranged by age and by course study which determines students' future profession. That means that they are highly heterogeneous. Students are different in their language proficiency, in their attitude toward language, in learning styles, motivation and interests. They are of different backgrounds, personalities and abilities. Multilevelness is then a logical outcome of all these factors. The problems that make teaching multilevel classes difficult are large number of students, discipline and motivation.

Although teaching in large classes is far from easy, nevertheless, one could hardly believe that there are some advantages of it. How would you feel as a teacher in a small class of students whose knowledge of English is poor, they lack motivation, and show no interest in learning the language? How to achieve student-centred approach with student as a subject of teaching? Difficult, of course. In small classes students lack individual attention and

interactive class atmosphere is missing, too. In large multilevel classes the teacher is faced with different cultural backgrounds, values, experiences and learning styles. This dissimilarity can help the teacher in creating student-centred work and a stimulating classroom climate thanks to variety of human resources he has in the class. In a multilevel class we can establish work climate which encourages students to help one another. Better students will help their peers, and shy students will ask for help. Peer teaching can develop a climate of cooperation.

The teacher would share his/her role with a group of more able students who will very soon act as teacher assistants. It is necessary to support cooperation more than competition. After competing the losers (usually less able students) feel even worse than before, while through cooperation the more able students look for more knowledge and the less able ones get support to start doing things on their own. Learning to be cooperative is a good lesson to students to function better in life and in society. Peer teaching helps a lot in creating good classroom climate. Teaching a large multilevel class does not leave the teacher time to be bored. It is also challenging because it makes teacher think, create and develop teaching techniques and good organization in the class.

No matter how much we admit the advantages of teaching multilevel classes, many problems and obstacles the teacher is faced with make it difficult. It is difficult for both the teacher and the students. The teacher should overcome the obstacle called classroom management. Some teachers can function in a kind of work chaos in the classroom while others look for perfection. The teacher should never let things in the classroom get out of control. In order to have good control he/she should take care of good organization. It is very important for students to know what is expected from them, they need teacher's support and feedback in order to hear how much they know. It is important to have personal contact with all the students. The problem might be more able students who are not afraid to sit at the front of the class, leaving weaker ones to sit at the back without any personal contact with the teacher. So even in a large class some children may feel lost and alone and normally, they will lose pace of the others and get even weaker than they were before.

Discipline in the classroom often comes out as a result of the relationship between the teacher and the students. It is a demanding job for the teacher concerning all the differences among students. Many students cause the problems because of a lack of involvement in teaching process, some are bored, not motivated and lacking interest for school. When students feel failure they will not participate in teaching but even interrupt the others. The teacher's role is again important. School children still go through the process of forming their personality, looking for their own self. Teacher and peers in the class play an important role in this process. So every teacher can try to give his/her own contribution in order to help child to take a positive, not a negative way in it. The teacher can help the child to feel self-esteem creating a happy and balanced teaching environment. Our personal contact with students, listening, talking, discussing the problems will be more productive than punishment, e.g. but the students should know how far they can go and what the limits of their behaviour are. We can sometimes allow "children to be children" but they cannot be allowed to misuse it.

Motivation plays an important, maybe an essential role in language teaching and learning. Young learners come to school highly motivated but over time many of them lose motivation. They get bored, tired and lose interest in learning. The reasons for changing motivation can be different and mostly are out of teacher's control (family life, health, other school subjects, friendship, etc.). Motivation is the wheel that moves the whole teaching and learning process and as such deserves a full attention to be paid to it. It influences teaching dynamics and somehow determines what can be achieved in the class. It also affects the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Dornyei, Z. (2001: 1) explains that "motivation is best seen as a broad umbrella term that covers a variety of meanings." Motives to do something in a certain way or to behave as people do, explain behaviour. Ian Tudor (2004)

sees the complex but fundamental phenomenon of motivation as the one of "connection". Students are expected to discover a sense of personal meaningfulness in their language learning. When students enter the classroom they have a sense of connection with the .language having pen pals, friends, relatives, etc. and the country whose language they learn. That is pragmatic motivation which connects the students with the language and with the learning process. If students remain unconnected from language learning "process is likely to be an uphill struggle for them and also for the teacher." (Tudor, 2004). Since language teaching has been organised at national level, the goals of LT programmes are looked at as certain products (what students should know, in what time, etc.) having knowledge and language competence in mind, while learning is referred to as a process including motivation and students' connection with language learning. Motivation is a learner-centred phenomenon which should be taken into consideration when we determine teaching goals, course design, teaching materials and strategies. Students should be accepted as people, each with their own ego personality as the source of human diversity. There are many ways to achieve motivation. When students join the language class, they bring with them certain attitudes and beliefs. They approach the language as something difficult, something they do not understand and believe they cannot learn. Teacher should motivate them to develop positive attitude to language .learning. Good learning strategies will also help. The reason for learning a language and what it offers should be quite clear to students. They like to be noticed as individuals with their personal expression and if the teacher gives them an opportunity to be "themselves", they will be motivated for learning the language. Giving students the possibility to choose and select what they would like to do can also help in motivating them. Students have different attitudes to language learning. For some of them it is a pastime and they will always be ready to use their creativity and share the ideas with others being highly motivated. Those for whom language learning is obligation will show all the differences in their approach to it.

The world is said to be the "global village" and people become more and more aware of the need to learn foreign languages. They are personally interested in the knowledge of foreign language in order to be able to communicate with people round the world. Teaching them will be an easy task for the teacher. On the other hand it is not always easy to motivate students who learn a language within a framework of formal education, bound by determined syllabi and coursebooks.

In spite of problems of teaching a language in large classes, discipline and multilevelness, there are ways how to cope with them. There are also strategies that "can turn a struggle into a challenging trial" (Hess, 2001). If a teacher has done his best to teach a good lesson and it turns into a complete nuisance, s/he should approach it as the mirror image of the well-known proverb which teaches us : "Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today". Every teacher can have a bad lesson, but let it be just one lesson. Think about it tomorrow. When your frustration is over, you will be able to teach a great lesson.

Take care of variety. Varieties of tasks suit different levels in the class, they keep students occupied for longer time, and keep attention and interest. The material can be dealt with even for a longer time, but the ways we do it should be different. Variety of teaching strategies can activate the quiet students.

Activities should be adapted to the pace accepted by the class. Neither too fast nor too slow tempo is good for teaching process. With false pacing students can get either bored or frustrated. Then they usually make trouble in the class.

Interest is no less important. If some students lose interest in teaching, they will cause problems and attract the attention to themselves, and not to the teaching. In order to avoid that to happen, the teacher can keep them curious, s/he will deal with important questions and topics, especially the ones concerning their lives. This can be achieved using variety of activities like attractive visuals, problem-solving activities, personalization and role-play.

They keep all students involved and interested in teaching and learning. Interesting lessons will attract students to get involved.

Collaboration and cooperation push students to participate in teaching process no matter what level their knowledge is of. It helps students to learn to accept somebody else's opinion, to take a risk to speak, to develop self-confidence. The teacher cannot have the control over all students, so it is natural that they help each others. Some students take the role of a teacher which makes them responsible. More progressive students realize that they learn even more when they explain something to the others. Popular strategies that help to develop collaboration are: group work, pair work, peer review, brainstorming, projects, poster presentations, peer-correction.

When the teacher wants to find a particular student in a group s/he will apply the strategy of individualization in his/her teaching. That means that s/he will use the strategies which allow a student to work at his own pace, in his own way and on the topic of his interest. Such strategies can be a poster report, individual writing (a diary, an advertisement, an article, a review, his own dictionary, his own web page, etc.).

Teacher should pay attention to personalization. Every student should be treated as a person, not as a number in the register book. If students feel that their opinion is not important and that they do not fit into the class, they will cause trouble to both the teacher and the fellow students. It is good to give them opportunity to express their thoughts, to discuss their plans and different topics. The teacher can use reading, listening and speaking tasks which lead to writing and help students to express themselves. Students can be asked to write different letters (of complaint, to the editor, to Problem Page, etc.), present their wishes and dreams, discuss their profession, work out posters of a place (known to them or imaginary one).

Close-ended exercises do not bring such a result as open-ended ones in which students choose their language and exercises. Students can get the beginning / the end of a sentence and have a choice to work out the rest in their own definition of words, match the answers, multiple choice questions, etc.

Change the ideas, routines or strategies if they do not work in the class. That will help keep discipline and motivation at a certain level. Try to avoid having only one student to participate. Let all students take part. Listen to them. The teacher is supposed to teach language, not by any means realize syllabus.

When we put questions to students, we should ask the questions that make students totally involved and interested in the material. Questions worked out by students are precious, because some of them tend to avoid questioning.

References

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