

Teaching a language in mixed-ability groups

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Abstract: Mixed-ability grouping is the educational practice of grouping students of various abilities together in the same space to receive the same instruction and materials. Students might be divide into groups with someone of a different age, that speaks a different language, or at a different academic level from themselves.

Keywords: theory, limits, problems, mixed ability, divide students, IQ tests, variations, potential, behavior, capacity.

INTRODUCTION

Group according to ability level

Putting your students into groups is very important, especially in a mixed level class. When you have students work in groups of three or more, make your groups according to ability level. This is important for several reasons. One is so your more advanced students don't feel like your class is a waste of time. If too many activities are below their proficiency level or they get grouped with too many beginners, advanced students may get bored and even become discipline problems. Remember, your content should be just a little more difficult than what your student are comfortable with, so if you are gearing activities toward your lower level students, you advanced students may feel slighted. Putting them into groups with students with similar abilities will allow them to use the more advanced language they are capable of and will present them with a greater challenge in class.

Expect different levels of performance from different levels of students

While your students are in these like level groups, it's okay to expect more from your more advanced students. You should feel free and even encouraged to set them more difficult assignments and tasks to complete. They will be able to handle it. And rather than feeling like they are being punished with more difficult work, they will likely be happy to have the challenge.

Pair in opposition to ability level

In a mixed level class, don't fall into the trap of doing everything different for the different skill levels of you students. If you do that, you'll just be teaching three classes at the same time with three different sets of preparation to do. It's actually to your students' advantage to have them work with students who are not at the same skill level as they are. Whereas a mixed level group can lead to lower level students getting lost

in the mix, pairing a lower level student with a more advanced student doesn't give either of them a place to hide. Both the beginning and the advanced student will have to participate if they are paired with each other. But the benefits don't stop there. Lower level students will actually improve in their language just by being paired with a more advanced student. And more advanced students will cement concepts and skills in their minds when they act as "teacher" for lower level students they work with.

Encourage a helpful atmosphere

Get your students in the mindset that they are all in this together, whether "this" is a daily assignment or a long term project. Students who are friendly and help each other will be more successful than those who are resentful of their classmates. Encourage students to help each other whenever possible, and don't feel like you are the only one who can give direction or assistance to your class members.

Allow first languages to be spoken

When students are helping and supporting each other, they will naturally fall into speaking their first language. Don't stop it. Allowing first language in your mixed level class will keep your less accomplished students in the loop during more complicated and advanced activities and prevent you from having to go the base level for every instruction and activity. Plus allowing first languages in class will encourage that supportive atmosphere you want among your students.

Make time for learning stations

Independent learning stations are great for mixed level classes. Students have the power to choose those activities they most enjoy and that are the greatest investment of their time. Your learning stations don't have to be complicated. Something as simple as a reading corner can be useful to students. For more about setting up learning stations, check out these ideas.

Tailor content to student interest when possible

I always like to personalize my classroom material and plans to include things I know my students will enjoy. This personalization changes from class to class because, as you probably already know, every class has a different personality. The more you can bring in the specific interests of this group of students, the more engaged they will be and the less of a struggle having a mixed level class will be.

Break your class into mini-classes

Back in the nineteenth century in the U.S., all children from a given town were in the same classroom and therefore the same class. But to get around this challenge, teachers had mini-classes within the larger group. They would call one class to them at a time and work with those students, giving them the instruction they needed. During this instruction, the other students worked on their own assignments at their desks until their turn up front. You can do something similar with your mixed level class, setting groups or "classes" within your larger class. Just because a group of students is taking

the same class doesn't mean they have to do the same thing. They probably shouldn't. If you set miniclasses in your mixed level class, take time to work with each group independent of the others from time to time. (You don't have to make it a daily practice.) Present different information and have different expectations for each group.

Use strategic interaction method

Have you tried the instruction method Strategic Interaction? It works like this. Divide your class into two groups. Each group will select one person (or more depending on the role play) to be the speaker for their group in the role play. Each group will have a different goal and a different piece of information related to the role-play. The speakers come up front and participate in the role play, but they are allowed to return to their group at any time for suggestions on what to say or how to handle the situation. By running the role-play this way, your more timid students can still participate without having to be in front of the class where they might not be comfortable. Everyone participates though not everyone has to speak from up front.

Make yourself available for one on one help

Whether it's after school or during office hours, making yourself available for one on one help is important when you teach a mixed level class. You can use this time to bring lower level student up to speed or to challenge higher level students to greater things that you don't have time to cover in class. Though you might be hesitant to put in the extra hours, doing so will make your time in class so much better, so it's worth it.

What are the disadvantages of mixed-ability grouping?

A disadvantage of mixed-ability grouping is that it requires a great deal of planning and effort from the teacher. Additionally, it requires time before the teacher is able to implement the practice.

What are the benefits of mixed-ability groups?

Mixed-ability grouping teaches students tolerance and understanding through an increased opportunity to hold discussions, and pushes lower-level students to grow academically. Mixed-ability grouping allows students the room to grow socially, emotionally, and academically.

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