

A Holistic Approach to Teaching in a Mixed Ability Classroom

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Introduction

Most classrooms have students with mixed abilities. This can pose a serious challenge to the teacher. The mixed abilities in students are due to various factors such as socio-economic and cultural background besides their cognitive and meta-cognitive intelligences. The former concerns their ages, education, cultural background, mother tongue and interest while the later concerns their intelligence, learning style, motivation, language knowledge, attitude towards language and their learning experience. According to Bremner (2008: 1:2) “A mixed ability class does not just consist of a range of abilities but a range of learning styles and preferences. All pupils will show strengths at different times depending on the topic being studied and the learning style being used.[...] All classes even those that have been set are mixed ability to certain degree.”

A creative teacher can adapt teaching materials to suit students’ with mixed abilities. For instance, a teacher could ask a group of slow learners to comprehend the text by answering the question and answers after reading the text. The others who are fast learners could be asked to summarize the text after answering the question and answers. The summaries then could be discussed in the classroom and after making the necessary corrections based on the feedback by the students, print outs could be given to them. Cooperative /Collaborative Learning could be one method of teaching to help students develop their language skills. A group could sit in pairs so that scaffolding is possible and learning takes place automatically through a joint effort. Further, soft skills such as interpersonal skills, team skills, interview skills, empathy could also be given emphasis in a mixed ability classroom.

The Challenges and Solutions

- ❖ **Massive Class strength:** Mixed ability classes in India are mostly packed with more than 60 students at the tertiary level. Fisch(1996) states that we must not be discouraged by large enrollments in the classroom.
- ✓ **Active Learning Approaches-** Fisch, (1996) suggest certain interactive learning and teaching strategies such as brainstorming, evocative visuals and textual passages, debates and role plays.
- ❖ **Disciplinary Problems:** Promoting civility in large heterogeneous classroom is a major challenge to teachers. There has been number of articles on troublesome behaviours, incivility, misconduct among college students both in and outside classroom (Downs 1992; Baldwin, 1997; Amada,1999).
- ✓ **Encourage Active Learning** –Carbone (1998) suggest three point solution. They are (1) Be prepared as to what to teach and the associated activities. Make sure tasks are clear and specific. For instance, summarize the lesson or make a list of positive aspects in the lesson.(2)Ensure full participation by providing independent, pair or group work.(3) Limit the time and the group size.
- ❖ **Absence of social interaction:** It is a known fact that there is less scope for social interaction in a large mixed ability classroom. Students fear to mix due to their varied socio- economic and cultural backgrounds.
- ✓ **Team Learning:** According to (Michaelsen & Black 1994) the primary advantage of team learning is that it includes (1) permanent and purposefully heterogeneous learning group. (2) grading could be done based on individual performance and peer evaluation.(3) the teacher can

devote his/her time to small group activities.(4) Teacher could shift roles from an instructor to a manager in the learning process.

- ❖ **Mixed Ability Groups:** This is a major challenge to the teacher. She/he needs to cater to students who have varied abilities. Students come from various backgrounds and cognitive backgrounds.
- ✓ **Collaborative Learning:** This creative teaching-learning strategy has been proved successful. It is defined as an arrangement in which students work in mixed ability groups and are rewarded on the basis of their work (Woolfolk,2001,p.593).

Structuring a Heterogeneous Group for Optimal Teaching- Learning Experience

It is very challenging for a teacher to see that the students have a rich teaching-learning experience. While delivering instructions, care should be taken that all are involved in the learning process. For this:

- a) Set learning objectives for each class keeping the heterogeneity in mind.
- b) Ensure all the students are seated in such a way that they can see and hear the teacher.
- c) They must be easily seated in groups without disturbing the whole class.
- d) Create a conducive learning environment
- e) Tasks should focus on independent, pair and group work.
- f) Plan and prepare the teaching materials in advance based on the level of the learners.
- g) Be time conscious. Each task should be timed and the classes should begin and end on time.
- h) Teach and test only what is taught.

Important Aspects While Teaching Mixed-Ability Classrooms

1. Designing Teaching Materials

Learning is a recursive process. This means new knowledge is built or reconstructed with the help of already acquired knowledge. The teaching material should be designed in such a

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way that it allows students' differences and prolongs the period of exploration, analysis and questioning. The materials must help them reflect and improve their learning process. They should give scope for reflection and self- assessment. The teacher cannot teach all the learners all the time. She/he must vary her/his teaching methods and the materials so that what is taught reaches out to all the students. The teacher ought to use tailor made materials to suit the heterogeneous class.

2. **Motivation**

There are many affective issues connected to teaching mixed ability classrooms. There are several studies that have shown that success alone is not enough to increase motivation. Success must be accompanied by the students' perception that his/her effort (rather than forces over which there are no control) was responsible for their success(Wittrock m1986). One way to motivate students is to make them speak positive sentences. For instance, when a student says, "I am totally lost", train him/her to say," What is it I know? Another way to motivate them is to call them by their names instead of their roll numbers. The teachers should communicate verbally and non-verbally to the students .This will break the ice and promote inter-communication skills.

3. **Cooperative and Collaborative Learning**

Cooperative learning is 'the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Smith,1996, p.71). As the name implies, students work together on common tasks, share information and support one another. This kind of learning is helpful for students to learn social skills such as conversing politely, acknowledging others contribution in a group, requesting others to contribute to the learning process. This happens because they work together. In this method of learning, teacher is an expert in the subject matter and the students ultimately arrive at the correct answers. But **collaborative learning** takes place when students and faculty work together to create knowledge... (Matthews, 1996, p.101). Smith (1996) lists five elements for successful cooperative learning groups. They are a) positive interdependence b) good interaction c) individual and group interdependence d) development of team skills and e) active group processing.

4. **Considering Students' Multiple Intelligences:** Howard Gardner's (1983) work on multiple intelligences confirms teachers' longtime observations that students come to the classroom with

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different skills and abilities. They may be linguistically intelligent, logistically-mathematically intelligent, spatially intelligent, body-kinesthetically intelligent, musically intelligent, interpersonally intelligent, intrapersonally intelligent, or naturalistically intelligent. Gardner states that the collaborative classroom creates opportunities as well as challenges for students who have different intelligences.

Collaborative Learning Techniques (Barkley, 2005)

The following techniques are helpful to enhance language skills in a mixed ability classroom.

Skills	Techniques/procedure	Advantages
Listening	<p>a) Note-taking Procedure: Students listen to a lecture or a text and take notes of the major points. Groups summarize the points and read it to the class.</p>	<p>-Enhances note-taking skills Improves writing skill.</p>
Speaking	<p>a) Think, pair and share Procedure: Pose a question to the class and give students few minutes to think pair up with the neighbour and share the response with the class.</p> <p>b) Round Robin- Brainstorming Session Procedure: Students generate ideas on a topic</p>	<p>-Enhances intrapersonal and Interpersonal skills through speaking -Increases willingness to compare and contrast views, rehearse responses before going public. -Improves listening and speaking skills -Ensure equal participation and encourages turn taking.</p>
Reading	<p>Case Study Procedure- Give students a</p>	<p>- Enhance reading and decision making</p>

	handout of a case. Let the groups frame as many questions and ask the other groups in class.	skills - Enhances critical appreciation of the text.
Writing	Collaborative writing Procedure – Students form teams and choose a topic .Then they generate ideas by brainstorming and then write the draft of the essay together. The draft is read to the class.	- Provides opportunities to learn and perform as a team. - Enhances writing skill. - Boosts morale of the team.

Conclusion

This paper is a small sample of what needs to be considered while teaching in a mixed ability classroom. It provides techniques by experts to enhance language skills in such classroom. Creative teachers can think of other different ways to enhance students’ multiple intelligences. It is important for teachers to recognize students’ potentials in a mixed ability classroom and design the teaching materials so as to suit their needs. Teachers have to understand students’ in-built needs both as language users and learners. The most challenging and rewarding aspects for teachers teaching a mixed ability class is to enable learners to effectively and efficiently learn the language without any kind of stress and anxiety.

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