

Teacher Attitudes in Mixed Ability Classes

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to tap the problems in the mixed ability classrooms, and comment on what the reactions of English teachers towards them should be. Having students who exhibit a wide range of English language ability in the same class often leads to serious pedagogical problems mostly because they are not well-motivated. Besides this, such kinds of students sometimes cause discipline problems, which not only spoils the teaching atmosphere, but also sometimes prevents teaching and learning activities in the curriculum. As for solutions we, teachers, generally act in different ways; some take it easy, while some take it very seriously. Actually, experienced teachers mostly deal with the above mentioned problem intuitively; however, the topic is crucial enough to examine academically. All in all, this paper will suggest and remind us of some practical and significant solutions to the problems regarding mixed ability classes.

Key words: mixed ability students, motivation, reaction, pedagogical problems

Introduction

I find needless to ask whether teachers have different leveled students in the classes, I am sure you have or will have such problems. We all very often encounter mixed ability (lower or higher leveled) students in our classrooms. And as teachers, we must learn to find out these kinds of problems and deal with them effectively. We generally ask these questions concerning the issue; what kind of problems do you have with them? How do you adjust them to the class atmosphere? And how do you treat them to concentrate on the lecture? Teachers need to perceive and recognize the nature of the problems students have in the classrooms. Our reactions towards these students are mostly different from each other, we sometimes approach the matter positively and deal with the problem very seriously but sometimes we ignore it. The unsolved matter of an individual may cause some serious problems like discipline, psychology and class management. Anxiety and disappointment encountered by some students regarding these matters may result in unexpected and extreme reactions. When such problems appear, as teachers we should confront these problems. Our approach and reaction shouldn't be negative. Always there are some students who are below average and this is quite normal. Different problems may also stem from the pedagogical, psychological or social causes, but we mainly focus on their weakness and difference of level.

General Problems with Different Leveled Students

Discipline problems

Teachers often lose control of their classes when they spend too much time with each student. While they are working with one student, others goof off. In his research, Jones found commonly experienced discipline problems when they finished a lecture and began helping students individually at their seats. Students usually began immediately to ask their teachers for help. Teachers usually responded with a "universal helping interaction." They tried to:

1. Find out where a student was having difficulty.
2. Re-explain the portion of the lesson the student did not understand.
3. Supply the student with additional explanations and examples.

Jones contends that this process ordinarily takes at least 5 minutes for each student. If the practice period lasts 30 minutes, no more than six students can receive help. While the teacher is helping these students, the rest of the class, particularly those who are unsuccessfully seeking help from the teacher, will talk and goof around. According to Jones, this result helps explain why talking to neighbors in ways that constitutes 80% of the discipline problems in a typical classroom. Not only does discipline break down, but the students who do receive help are unable to use

long, drawn-out explanations to successfully complete their work. The universal helping interaction is too slow and inefficient. Teachers tie themselves up for too long period with too few students and leave too many students unattended and for too much of the work period (Jones, 1987a. cited in Jones H.F. cited in Edwards H.C.2000.p.204). As long as the students are involved and interested, and if the topics are challenging they will love the lecture and appreciate the teacher.

Demotivation

As the essence of learning is motivation, learning may not result in success if we can not motivate the mixed leveled students. Due to conflict of such students, concentration and attention of both the teacher and the learners will be distracted. Low-leveled students may lose self-confidence which is essential for language learning, and the upper leveled students most probably will be bored because their needs are not met satisfactorily. "So what teachers should do is to get the students attention Students lack motivation to learn for various reasons. In some cases they may have limited ability and experience difficulty keeping up and consequently develop chronologically low expectations while desensitizing themselves to failure. Others develop learned helplessness from attributing their performance to low ability. A third group of students who have a lot of difficulties are those who are obsessed with the need to protect their self-worth and who thus focus on performance goals rather than learning goals." (Edwards H.C.2000. p.306). Apart from this, demotivation may also cause some psychological problems here is the main one; sense of helplessness will cause the low leveled student to have the absence of self-esteem, and this may evoke an inner-conflict which is revealed in a negative way.

Problems of Class Management

Since different leveled students do not keep up with the lesson the learning atmosphere will be spoilt, their peers will be affected badly and use of class time will be wasted. Professionally a teacher must keep the students active at any moment. In order to do that, he/she should create many actions and attractions to take their attention. Doyle (1986) contends that classrooms are difficult to manage because they are multidimensional, simultaneous, and unpredictable. So this matter is urgent and teachers should perform in full view of every student. Because of the many type of characters in the same classroom, any occasion can have multiple consequences that may require different reactions from the teacher. (Edwards H.C.2000)

Teachers`Reactions to Such Problems

Generally we are not very patient towards the low leveled students, after warning them twice or three times we get angry with them, or even we behave very harshly because they spoil the class atmosphere. With high leveled ones we do not have many problems with them but hardworking students create problems or at least they rightfully show dissatisfaction.

Suggestions and Solutions

A) Things That Should Be Done

1-Attention

In order to take attention of the weak students we should ask simplified questions, or decrease our speech rate for them and also using eye –contact, gestures and mimics we can draw the students` attention back to the lecture.

2- Negotiation

We can work at making language comprehensible to students by negotiating meaning. The teacher can open up lines communication by using questions that aim at classification and confirmation. These same types of questions are useful to negotiate meaning for the students who have less enthusiasm and lower levels.

3- Easier tasks may encourage weak students, and enhance their self-confident.

E.g. In high level class students are discussing about the wars in history, we may ask weak students only the place and the date and the heroes of the war may be country. If we adjust the questioning to the language

level of the students they can manage uttering only a few words and by time, they may improve and gain self-confidence.

4- Cooperative Work (Team Model)

If you are suffering a lot from the weak or different leveled students, the way of grouping the students with better ones may help you. Because one of the ways of learning is to be with friends, they learn from each other. One educational strategy Glasser advocates to promote more meaningful learning and reduce discipline problems is cooperative learning, also known as the learning team model. He believes that this kind of learning provides students a better way to satisfy their basic needs. Glasser recommends that students work on long-term projects with other students to go deeper into a subject and become more involved in the experience of learning. For this purpose, he suggests that teachers organize teams of from two to five students who have reached different levels of achievement. He lists several benefits to be gained from cooperative team learning. (Glasser, 1986a cited in Edwards, 2000):

- Working in teams provides students a sense of belonging, which helps motivate them to work harder and achieve more.
- The more advanced students find it fulfilling to help less able team members because they want the power and friendship that go with a high-performing team.
- Less able students also have their needs fulfilled. In the group, they are able to accomplish something, whereas they did very little before. Their contribution to the team is appreciated more than their previous individual efforts were.
- By working in teams, students gain a greater sense of independence from the teacher and discover themselves able to make valuable contributions to the class.
- Learning teams serve as a structure within which students can obtain a deeper understanding of school subjects. Unless students understand the subjects they study more deeply, they will be unable to make the vital connection between knowledge and power that must underlie any attempt to improve today's schools.
- Teams provide a framework within which students can better evaluate themselves. More than just grades may be considered as evidence that students are learning.
- Promote positive beliefs about ability. Help them see that their intelligence is not a given amount, but that they can increase it with effort and learning.
- Help students make a connection between their efforts and achievements. Help them set realistic goals and develop confidence in reaching them.
- Help students learn to take pride in personal accomplishments and their developing expertise, and to minimize the attention given to competition and social comparisons.
- Help them achieve a feeling of self-worth through their achievement. (Covington, 1992)
- And also, depending on the experience in their research, Hallam & Ireson (2001) claim that a more cooperative environment is encouraged, where students work in groups and support each other. By doing this A more permissive classroom atmosphere will be possible. But on the other hand they mention that they include the comments from a school teacher: 'I have a few reservations about mixed ability teaching because the higher ability pupils are not stretched to their full potential. However, we do very well with the lower ability in the classroom.'

5- Using the Praise-Prompt-Leave Sequence

Teachers can escape the predicament of mixed ability students by avoiding universal helping interactions and instead using the praise-prompt-leave sequence of instruction. (Jones H.F. cited in Edwards H.C.2000.p.204)

Praise- In giving praise, the teacher reviews what the student has done right, which not only provides a positive experience for the student but also defines the starting point for new instruction. For teachers to become good at giving praise, they need to avoid the common habit of looking for errors in students' work. This tendency causes teachers to communicate dissatisfaction as well as frustration and exasperation. Teachers should build on adequately completed work, not defects. They need to develop an aptitude for seeing the positive and making it a reflex action. Once the strength of a student's work is identified, appropriate words can be used to describe it. This language must be a specific description of exactly what is well done- Avoid statements such as "Nice job" and "You're off to a good start," Instead, say "You have organized this paragraph well. There are transitions between all the sentences."

Prompt- To prompt is to tell students exactly what to do next. Prompting should be clear and simple. Ordinarily, mastery of concepts involves many steps. Students, however, can perform these steps only one at a time. Teachers therefore should provide a prompt that requires a one-step performance. Asking students to perform many steps tends to produce cognitive overload. Teachers tend to bog students down with excessive, complex verbiage.

They talk too much and explain more than students can keep straight at one time. Instead, teachers should prompt students about the next action to take and then encourage them to act on the prompt. Prompts can either direct a student to do something or not to do something. An initiating request asks a student either to begin something or to do it more. A terminating request asks a student to stop something or to do it less.

Leave- Once a clear and simple prompt is given; teachers should leave and turn their attention immediately to other students, take time to observe how students act on prompts. Leaving will cause discomfort, given their inclination to stay at students' desks long enough to see how they respond to instructions. Even so, teachers must avoid the term longer. Not only does leaving convey confidence in students' ability instruction given, but it also gives teachers more time to circulate in the system, teachers can see more students and see the same student more than once in one class period. At the same time, the teacher gains greater control by being able to move around the entire classroom more quickly. (Jones 1987 cited in Edwards, 2000).

6-Types of learners

Hallam, S& Ireson, J.(2001) classify the learners type as; gifted, high-end, academically talented and advanced learners, and we can add lower leveled ones to this group. All these miscellaneous type of learners bother us but if we identify them very well we can find solutions to the problems. Of course gifted students need special interest, low leveled students (if not little school kids) can be motivated in the cooperative learning groups with the assistance of advanced learners. And Like the others they should be encouraged and satisfied as well, and their abilities need to be developed. These learners may fail to achieve their potential without teachers that coach for applying useful, high level and challenging curriculum.

B) Things That Should Not Be Done.

We sometimes unconsciously demotivate the weak students by motivating them a bit, and later discourage them badly by mentioning their unforgivable mistakes or so on. In the Jones' Model Fredric H. Jones suggests that teachers should be aware of how most universal helping interactions between students and teachers are initiated and avoid getting caught up in them. The following are actions that might be avoided:

Asking students where they are having difficulty is the most common and straightforward means of initiating a helping interaction. Teachers often ask, "Where are you having difficulty?" or "What is it you don't understand?"

1. Teachers are often aware of the difficulties students experience and identify these difficulties as they offer to help. For example, they may say, "I see you are having trouble carrying the correct digit. Let me show you how it is done."
2. Focusing on the students' strengths before calling attention to the problems is a common tactic among teachers who are aware of the necessity of giving students support during feedback. They believe that giving good news first will diminish the negative effects of the bad news that follows. A teacher might say, "You did the first few problems correctly, but when you got to the ones requiring long division, you did them all wrong."
3. Some teachers express their exasperation with students in the way they use body language, such as shaking the head from side to side, as if to say, "I have never seen anything like this. How could you have worked these problems this way?"
4. Sometimes, before they help students, teachers give voice to comments that are simply derogatory (for example, "How can you be so stupid?"). Jones calls these comments "zaps and zingers." Considerable harm can be done to students to whom these comments are directed. (Edwards, 2000. p.241)
5. Should not be ignored and be insulted
6. High performance should not be expected from the weak ones.
7. Should not be reprimanded, dismissed from the class
8. Teachers should never try corporal punishment.

Conclusion

Having different or mixed leveled students is unavoidable for the teachers of languages, so what we've got to do are to accept the situation. And without ignoring they try to find satisfactory and productive solutions. These solutions are mainly to put them into a cooperative work, motivate them by giving extra help and home task, ask high leveled students to help the lower leveled. Especially if these kinds of students lose their self confidence for

learning they may start thinking that they can not do anything. So teachers should carefully approach in order to help them in time, and prevent them from spoiling the class atmosphere. Children with learned helplessness also benefit from attribution retraining. This consists of providing a planned series of experiences, couched within an achievement context in which modeling, socialization, practice, and feedback are used to teach them (1) to concentrate on what they try to learn without worrying about failing, (2) to deal with mistakes by retracing their steps to find where they slipped up and by analyzing the problem to find a more reasonable approach, and (3) to attribute their failures to insufficient effort, lack of information, or use of ineffective strategies rather than lack of ability (Craske, 1985). These efforts are necessary because success alone is not enough. (Edwards, 2000 p.307). Cooperative learning provides hope for altering this unhappy situation. It provides a way for students to assert themselves without the discomfort of always being compared with their peers and found lacking. Properly organized cooperative learning can help all children experience success and feel more accepted in school. Classrooms thus become more exciting places to learn because students have greater control over what they learn and because the atmosphere in which learning takes place is more fun. In cooperative learning programs, teachers can capitalize on the motivation students already have for learning by involving them in decisions about what they learn and then allowing them to pursue their own interests in their own style. (Edwards, P.313, 2000). Examining the mixed ability teaching environment and students at different ages, and reading the comments of some teachers in the book written by Hallam, S& Ireson, J. (2001) we assume that mixed ability learners at early ages may be more problematic than the mixed ability adult learners. So Cooperative learning can solve our problem at least to an extent.

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