

TEACHING MIXED ABILITY GROUPS

Theories X and Y (McGregor, 1961)

- Theory X:**
- students hate work, avoid it, and cheat whenever possible
 - it is essential to coerce students and threaten them with punishment
 - students are devoid of ambition and need direction and security

- Theory Y:**
- students enjoy work
 - students can exert control and direct work
 - students are committed to course objectives and possess a sense of achievement
 - students are willing to take responsibility
 - students show a great deal of imagination in problem-solving

Teacher questions (Littlejohn, 1993)

- Theory X:**
- how can we motivate our students and sustain that motivation?
 - how can we make them speak English in class?
 - how can we make them behave?
 - how can we cope with mixed abilities and varied interests?

- Theory Y:**
- how can we find out what the learners think about their classes?
 - how can we best share decisions with the learners?
 - how can we help them discover what they want or need to learn?
 - how can we cope with the various wants or needs that emerge?
 - how far is it appropriate to go with a particular class?

Solutions?

1. Have more pair and group work. *What sort of pairs?*
2. Grade the tasks. *Where will you find the time and energy? What about assessment?*

Solutions

“Having different learners doing different things at the same time will not work unless that way of working has been introduced gradually. It is not something which can happen overnight. It calls for a change in attitude both on the part of the teacher and of the learners. Learners need to be introduced to working with less teacher control, slowly and gradually. They need to be given the opportunity to learn how to learn and how to become responsible for their own learning. The ultimate mixed ability classroom is one in which all learners are working towards stated goals in different ways.” (Ellis, 1994)

Practical suggestions

- Consider alternative seating arrangements.
- Use the classroom walls imaginatively.
- Start from the learners rather than the coursebook.
- Look for intrinsically interesting topics. What about a cross-curricular approach?
- Use the students' own surroundings, experience and culture as a starting-point.
- Work from German and adopt a comparative approach.
- Use at least some *open* rather than just *closed* tasks.
- Use project work and independent work (eg simple fieldwork, Internet research etc)
- Give an overview in advance.
- Group tasks together two or three at a time.
- Agree timing with the learners.
- Allow *processing time*.
- Involve the learners in classroom decision-making.
- Provide choices.
- Train them in skills which will help them to become more independent (eg train them in the use of monolingual/bilingual dictionaries, basic terminology, and phonemic script, introduce them to useful reference sources, show them how to keep vocab notebooks)
- Get feedback from the learners (eg through questionnaires, a discussion box)
- Encourage them to talk about the learning process.
- Get learners to produce resources (eg exercises, tasks, tests) themselves.
- Build up a collection of resources to be used by early finishers (eg a vocab box, a reading box, an exercise box, a puzzle box, a games box etc)

(ideas adapted from Littlejohn, 1992-4 and Ellis, 1994)

Brief bibliography

The following are worth looking at:

Campbell, C & Kryszewska (1992) Learner-Based Teaching (Oxford)

Deller, S (1990) Lessons from the Learner (Longman)

Ellis, M (1993) *Approaches to Mixed Ability Groups*, Polish Teacher Trainer 2/1

Littlejohn, A (1992-4) *Teaching younger learners: a framework for understanding and some indications for change*, ELT News 21, 22 & 24

Prodromou, L (1992) Mixed Ability Classes (MEP)

Puchta, H & H Schratz (1992) Teaching Teenagers (Longman)

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