

The Challenges of Working with Mixed Ability Classes

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The Challenges of Working with Mixed Ability Classes: *The paper presents the challenges a teacher faces when working with mixed ability pupils when teaching English in the Bulgarian primary school classroom. It justifies the need for developing teachers' professional knowledge and skills for planning, designing, organizing and teaching an English language lesson to a multi-level class.*

Key words: *Mixed ability classes, Multi-level classes, Teaching English, Bulgarian primary school pupils.*

INTRODUCTION

Mixed ability level teaching is related to working together with students who have different personalities, skills, interests and learning needs. Though most classes are usually multi-level, teachers (especially those with little or no experience), find teaching such classes a very difficult and demanding task as it involves planning lessons which include a rich diversity of tasks corresponding to a variety of learning styles and abilities. The adoption of a flexible methodology is considered a challenge by some teachers as they have to put more effort when designing their lessons, they might need to learn new organizational and / or classroom management skills – and that may be something beyond their pedagogical skills.

However, teaching a non-homogeneous group of pupils can be viewed positively because it serves as a trigger for teachers' professional growth and development as it involves the usage of variety of approaches, teaching techniques, interaction patterns, and tasks.

The paper aims to present the challenges a teacher faces when working with mixed ability pupils and to justify the need for enriching the of pre-service English language teacher training programmes in Bulgaria with topics related to multi-level teaching.

MIXED-ABILITY TEACHING AND STUDENT TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN BULGARIA

The current situation of pre-service teacher training in Bulgaria shows that teacher training in certain school subjects (among which foreign language) and in the professional area of *Primary School Pedagogy and Foreign Language* combine “fundamental research with basic pedagogical training (in pedagogical and psychological disciplines and in subject training methods” [2, p. 217]. This suggests that future teachers acquire an “in-depth mastering of basic knowledge in certain research areas as well as of teaching methods so that pupils can also acquire this knowledge” [2, p. 217].

The solid theoretical preparation of young teachers, along with the practical skills acquired during the compulsory teaching practice (which includes “hospitane”¹, school practice and pre-diploma pedagogical practice), would guarantee that they are fully-equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge for teaching English in the Bulgarian primary classroom which usually comprises of about 17 to 26 children who constitute a non-homogeneous group of pupils. But is that the case?

It's very difficult to provide a single answer to that question because it is not only the professional qualities of the English language primary school teacher that need to be examined, but also the many and different aspects of primary school education which have

¹ Hospitane – a term which originates from the Latin noun *hospes, it is, m* – “a guest”, “a visitor” ; meaning that during this part of the teaching practice student-teachers first observe lessons and then teach for a certain period.

an effect on language teaching – e.g. the type of school (private or state), the number of pupils in class, the integration of students with intellectual disturbances in the general schools, students with emotional and / or behavioural disorders, bilingual students (to whom English might come as a second foreign language if they do not speak Bulgarian at home) and many others.

What we can say for sure is that trainee teachers of English do not feel very confident in confronting a group of pupils who have different language learning ability, language knowledge, cultural background, learning style, attitude towards language, mother tongue, intelligence, world knowledge, learning experience, knowledge of other languages, age, gender, personality, confidence, motivation, interests, and/or educational level [7, p.304]. This can be proved by the data from the Baseline survey of English language teacher education 2001-2002 [6]. It has established that the observed student teachers follow closely the lesson plan, are generally unprepared to react to unexpected situations in the classroom and experience difficulties both in communicating with and motivating their pupils. Apart from that the student teachers do not “are unaware of the importance of teaching skills and techniques and ... [are] unable to provide effective student-centered lessons ...[so] they often [do] not succeed in involving the whole class – only the best pupils” [6, p. 83]. Their lessons:

- lack the variety of techniques and trainees rely on one or two traditional formats when presenting new language;
- lack meaningful listening practice;
- do not include a variety of interaction patterns;
- are based on a particular format for reading comprehension in which answers are elicited from pupils after translation of vocabulary;
- lack activities aiming at freer communicative practice.

Furthermore, teacher trainees are unable to integrate writing activities meaningfully in the lesson and offer enough guidance and adequate feedback and they mainly rely on translation as a technique for conveying meaning.

All this comes to suggest that the future teachers of English need additional training that would help them reach all their pupils, make learning fun and enjoyable and approach each child as an individual with different interests and abilities. Although most university methodology courses present an overview of approaches and methods on dealing with multi-level classes, the effect of using those approaches needs to be examined in greater depth and opportunities for trainee teachers to try them out before or during the teaching practice should be provided. One suggested way of solving the problem is to establish a requirement for trainees to try out two or three of the approaches in this way. “In practice what is needed most is a chance of emphasis in the classroom to create the context where all learners feel valuable and have the space and confidence to try” [5, p. 4].

POSSIBLE PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS TO WORKING WITH MIXED ABILITY CLASSES

In order to give all pupils the chance to benefit from their lessons it is vital to take into account their differences and plan lessons or activities within the lesson accordingly. To be able to do that future teachers of English need to know what the possible problems and solutions of working with multi-level classes are. Some of the possible problems a teacher may encounter when working with children with different language abilities can be summarized in terms of the following areas:

- (1.) Materials and resources** – Most language textbooks are designed for an ideal homogeneous class and pupils react in a different way to them due to their individual differences and preferred learning styles

Possible problem

A teacher might have difficulties finding appropriate teaching materials and resources that fit the needs, learning styles, individual language level and interests of all pupils.

Possible solutions

- *Adapt some of the materials (e.g. make language simple);*
- *Design your own teaching materials;*
- *Support the teaching materials with visual stimuli (e.g. photos, pictures, etc.)*

(2.) Tasks – The tasks included in the lesson should correspond to the language level, age and abilities of pupils.

Possible problem

Weaker pupils find the tasks for homework from the course book difficult and often come without homework

Slower learners can't participate because the tasks are too difficult for them

Possible solution

- *Create easier and more challenging versions of the same homework task*
- *Help visual learners by using visual clues;*
- *Vary the level of tasks (e.g. reduce the number of choices or delete the more difficult choices in multiple-level exercises)*
- *Include open-ended tasks which help learners work at their own pace*
- *Encourage learner collaboration (pupils work alone and then in pairs or groups and share and complete what they couldn't do);*
- *Grade tasks*

(3.) Individual needs, interests and strengths of learners – Every pupil has individual interests and needs which form their attitude to the subject matter and / or the teacher.

Possible problem

The teacher does not know his / her pupils' interests and needs

Some pupils may find the lesson boring because the topic is not familiar to their own life or interests, while others are challenged and interested

The teacher does not know what the strengths of each learner are

Possible solution

- *Try to get to know your learners, their language level and interests*
- *Make sure every child has participated in some way in the lesson. Organize more pair and group work activities which involve more children at the same time.*
- *Try to find every single learner's strength by offering a variety of activities*

(4.) Participation – Some of the learners have difficulties speaking the target language for various reasons (e.g. lack of confidence in their knowledge and language skills) while other learners are pushy and willing to express their thoughts and ideas in the target language. As a result some students participate actively in the lesson and others do not.

Possible problem

Some pupils are interested in the lesson and participate actively, while others are unwilling and reluctant to take part in the lesson activities

Possible solution

- *Plan and use a variety of activities that suit different 'intelligences';*
- *Think of pupils in a positive way - try to find the strengths and preferred learning style of everyone*

Possible problem

Extrovert pupils tend to occupy the teacher's attention while shy learners are suppressed

Possible solution

- *Involve shy learners;*
- *Mix the participants in the groups*

(5.) Motivation

Possible problem

Weaker pupils have problems copying with the different tasks while bright pupils finish earlier

Possible solution

- *Weak pupils need encouragement and support from the teacher;*
- *Reduce the difficulty of tasks*

(6.) Discipline – Pupils work with different pace – those who are more advanced cope quickly with the tasks or get impatient when the teacher has to repeat an explanation, while pupils who have a lower level of knowledge and skills complete tasks more slowly.

Possible problem

Learners who complete tasks quickly get impatient when they have to wait for other to do the same or answer the teacher's questions

Possible solution

- *Help pupils learn to respect diversity in terms of skills and abilities;*
- *Prepare additional activities for quick those pupils who finish earlier;*
- *Delegate some remedial work to fast learners by asking them to repeat an explanation, write the new words on the board, share their personal opinion on a task, etc.*

The suggested solutions do not exhaust the list of possible approaches to solving the illustrated problems. They just offer an initial idea of how to cope with the challenges of working with multi-level classes. In fact the given techniques can be summarized in the following way [4, p. 6]:

1. Encourage cooperation and respect amongst your pupils.
2. Accept all their contributions as valid and valuable.
3. Use visuals open to interpretation at various levels.
4. Involve the whole class in the checking phase.
5. Use pupils' non-linguistic skills (e.g. their knowledge of other subjects or their ability to draw or mimic).
6. Grade your worksheets, making them usable by pupils at different level.
7. Use drama techniques
8. Make the most of group and pair work.
9. Treat your pupils as people with a past and future.
10. Treat your pupils as people who think.
11. Treat your pupils as people who feel.
12. Have a store of supplementary tricks, such as games, jokes, puzzles, stories, etc. to deal with early finishers.

It depends on the university methodologist how to present these problems and possible solutions to his / her trainee teachers of English –he /s he could prepare a handout with the possible teaching techniques or design a different task focusing on the challenges of multi-level classes. But regardless of what approach the university methodologist would choose to introduce the trainees to mixed ability teaching techniques, it is important to establish that as future teachers they should try to make their language classroom inclusive for all learners. The faster the trainees realize that:

- pupils learn from each other and not only from the teacher;
- pupils learn at a different pace;
- slow learning can sometimes lead to solid knowledge;
- children's interests and motivation tend to change easily;

the faster they will be able to cope with the problems multi-level classes present.

CONCLUSION

The practical implications of applying the presented solutions to dealing with multi-level classes are the object of study of a separate research. This paper just pinpoints the difficulties that teacher trainees of English experience during their teaching practice, their level of preparation to work with non-homogeneous classes and suggests some possible approaches of solving the problems student teachers might face.

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Докладът е рецензиран.