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CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN TEACHING MULTILEVEL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. *The author of this article discusses the challenges teachers face with while teaching multilevel students and suggests solutions to increase efficiency of educational process and improve students' language skills.*

Methods. *In this article we used online data which includes academic articles written by the scholars or practitioners in the field along with data from the institutions. Data collection methods applied are qualitative and they comprise classroom observation, interviews, reflective papers and analysis of classroom extracts.*

Results. *Teaching in multilevel classes is a difficult process which definitely needs a great deal of commitment on the part of teachers and it can be productive if teachers create appropriate learning atmosphere including pair and group activities, project work, giving positive feedback also taking into account various learning styles.*

Conclusion. *Using various approaches, techniques and learning strategies along with differentiated instruction and levelled tasks serve as efficient ways to achieve success with mixed ability classes.*

Introduction. For English teachers working at educational institutions focused on ESP (English for Specific Purposes) enhancing students' knowledge of English has always been a challenging task especially nowadays when in Uzbekistan there is a great demand for highly qualified specialists with wide range of abilities including language skills. According to the report of the World Bank staff among the traits that employers value in their workers, several non-cognitive as well as cognitive skills (e.g. Russian and English language knowledge) emerge as those that are most lacking [1]. When students from lyceums and colleges in Uzbekistan come to study at higher educational institutions where English is taught as part of their curriculum in Uzbekistan, students' language level ranges from beginner to intermediate level. This creates difficulties for teachers to improve their language proficiency. What methods and techniques teachers can use to deal with this situation and achieve their aim in educational process? Specialists in the field of language

acquisition recommend various ways to increase their students' level of English language and in this article we will consider what can be done to facilitate better learning.

Discussion. While teaching multilevel students teachers first of all should take into account their learning styles. In order to address all learning styles Felder suggests such teaching techniques as motivating learning, balancing material which needs problem solving with the one which needs fundamental understanding, using pictures before, during, and after presentation of the verbal material, showing films, using computer-assisted instruction, providing small-group brainstorm activities, giving students the option of cooperating on homework assignments to the greatest possible extent, talking to students about learning styles, both in advising and in classes. He states that explaining to learners how to learn most efficiently may help them to reshape their learning experience so that they can be successful [4, 680]. If teachers organize their teaching based on diverse learning styles and strategies, their students may benefit a lot in making progress.

According to students' learning styles teachers might think of many various ways to engage students in learning and evoke their interest in language learning. Even if it is too complicated to manage mixed ability classes, it is still attainable to carry out great work with them including such activities as pair work, small group work, and projects and so on. In organizing pair work we can choose two students with different levels of English and the weaker student can learn or get help from the student with the higher level of English. However, we should be cautious because the student with higher level of English might get bored or do the task on his own for his peer too which is not fair and beneficial for the other student. In small groups there are a lot of opportunities as teacher can assign tasks according to students' level. In this situation after accomplishing a collaborative activity every student gets a sense of achievement by contributing to the whole group activity.

Roberts in her article "Teaching in the Multilevel Classroom" says that the first thing to do in planning instruction for a multilevel class is to consider the varied proficiency levels of their students. She distinguishes below-level, at-level and above-level students and gives description to each level. In short, below-level students are struggling learners, at-level students are learners progressing as they should and above-level students are those having more language proficiency than the at-level students. Also here a student's abilities in each of the four language skills - listening, reading, speaking and writing – might be at varying levels, i.e. that the same student can be more proficient in one skill and less proficient in another one. It is widely known that grouping strategies work well with diverse levels of proficiency. While grouping students in four ways (pair work, group work, teamwork and whole class work), they can also be paired or grouped as "like-ability" or "cross-ability". Roberts explains that like-ability is where students of the same proficiency level work together, whereas cross-ability is where students of different proficiency levels work together. Teamwork and whole classwork are always organized as cross-

ability grouping, in pair work and group work it depends on the teacher which form of matching students to choose [7, 2].

According to Roberts, in order to make teacher's work easier it is preferable for them to "teach to the middle" and then give different, appropriately levelled tasks. In their lesson planning teachers may assign tasks levelled by proficiency, language skill and interests of the learner. For example, the same task can be accomplished in three steps, students of varied levels taking part in the step which suits their proficiency level. Thanks to availability of resources in the teacher's edition, teachers can choose expansion activities to use in their multilevel classroom.

Along with the activities done during the lesson, teachers can encourage students work on projects in which learners should solve a problem, do research or develop a product. For example, engineering students can create a model of an electric device and explain how it is made and how it works. When projects are organized around one topic and students are divided into groups based on their interests rather than their proficiency levels, this is known as thematic instruction [6, 3]. Thus, learners develop not only language skills, but also problem solving, critical thinking, team building skills (Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006).

While working with mixed ability classes, teachers should assist in developing students' four skills taking into consideration that there might be some nuances such as that in their future career students might use more listening, speaking rather than reading and writing or vice versa. One of the four language skills speaking plays a significant role in further development of a student particularly their professional career. Because the students' level of English varies in ESP classes, improving speaking skills in these conditions is far beyond the desired results.

Many researchers tackled issue of enhancing speaking skills of language learners. Based on them we suppose that there are some views which can have a positive effect if applied to certain circumstances. While teaching speaking skills particularly in multilevel classes the teacher should always be in search of new methods and techniques experimenting with various ways of language acquisition taking into account students' learning styles. Susan Bremner in her article "Some Thoughts on Teaching a Mixed Ability Class" asserts that teachers need more training to be informed about catering different learning styles. She also mentions Bloom's taxonomy which can help teachers to enjoy benefits of using collaborative group work [2].

During our teaching almost every teacher comes face to face with a situation when students tend to switch to their native language, in our case to Uzbek and here it is important to ensure English-only environment even this is a difficult task, everyone should aim for it. L. Jones favors the idea of student-centered class and states "If students want to improve their speaking skills, there's no substitute for pair and group work" [5].

M. Roberts says that there is more support for the multilevel instructor, including

teacher's editions and ready-made reproducible that can be easily adapted to multilevel instruction. I strongly agree with her that instead of creating different lessons with different goals for the multilevel students, teachers can "teach to the middle" and then assign different tasks according to each student's level [7].

One of the supporters of the text-based approach in teaching speaking Anne Burns points out that textbook dialogues may be appropriate at beginner stages of learning because they are predictable and focused on few grammatical features. They will not serve learners well in the realities beyond the classroom. A text-based approach tries to involve learners in the activities helping to understand and participate in authentic interactions [3].

Along with different speaking skills students have various needs and learning styles, topics of interest which teachers should pay attention to when choosing strategies and activities to improve students' speaking. Every success depends on teacher's experience, knowledge and creativity y in engaging students in such activities as role plays, making oral presentation, describing pictures, conducting surveys and interviews, etc.

Besides speaking our ESP students should increase their reading comprehension level and be able to understand various types of texts which they may come across during their future career. For a start, in mixed ability classes teachers can use graded readers which are a great resource as their language is simplified to help second language learners read them. For students reading in English is boring and hard because they often find too many unknown words which they have to look up in their dictionaries and language structure presented in the text might be far beyond their level. In this case graded readers are a great tool to use with your students as they motivate them to learn and make the process of reading enjoyable. Due to the advancement in modern educational technologies there is a great variety of online resources to improve reading such as reading materials in 3 levels based on the Guardian Weekly collection of most important stories. These reading series are on different topics which gives teachers the opportunity to choose topics according to students' needs and interests. Step by step, if students practise the habit of everyday reading, no matter what kind of material they prefer, they won't have any difficulty while understanding authentic texts whether they are on sport, popular science or technology.

Conclusion. In my view though teaching mixed ability students is a challenging task which might be time-consuming and it demands creativity and experience and knowledge of teaching methodology of a teacher. However, if thoroughly planned, lessons in multilevel classroom can be interesting and engaging for learners at all levels. I think differentiated instruction and levelled tasks are among the most favorable approaches teachers can take in their educational process. Aiming at achieving success with their learners, teachers should apply modern educational methods, techniques and learning strategies, adjusting them for their students' needs.

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