

TACKLING CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH TO MULTILEVEL CLASSES

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Nowadays the problems associated with teaching foreign languages in so-called multilevel classes, where different students have different abilities and different level of language skills, are getting very common for all kinds of educational establishments as students tend to come from different learning backgrounds, they may differ significantly in the speed of acquiring knowledge, motivation, learning styles etc. Surely, the work in different-level classes can be quite intimidating and challenging for young and inexperienced teachers, though the most appropriate and adequate solution to the problem is to be found. While teaching to mixed-ability groups it is essential to be aware of teaching strategies that can contribute to tackling the problem effectively. The problem appears to have a lot of negative aspects that still can be turned into positive ones. Obviously, the teacher has to meet the needs of all the students of the class, thus in the process of acquiring knowledge it is crucial to organise the pair work in such a way that students start learning from each other.

It would be appropriate to quote French essayist Joseph Joubert who wrote: "To teach is to learn twice." It means that advanced learners will facilitate the development of average learners' skills while benefiting from it too. No doubt that peer tutoring can be a perfect solution to the problem of teaching in mixed-ability classes. The use of pair work based on the principles of peer tutoring helps improve the skills of average learners while solidifying skills of advanced learners that are usually proud to fulfill the role of an "aide". Adopting a peer-assisted learning strategy in different-level English classes the teacher assumes responsibility for putting students in pairs or small groups ensuring that advanced learners are put together with "underachievers". The proper choice of pairs for application of peer tutoring strategy results in the groundbreaking increase of students' motivation and achievements.

Hence, we come to a conclusion that peer tutoring can help not only in educational process enhancement, but also in facilitating favourable and homely atmosphere in the class. The scientific literature on the problems of peer tutoring abounds with examples of successful peer tutoring application in the system of higher education. Investigations and surveys into achievements and progress in developing all types of language skills indicate that average students tend to give positive evaluation of peer-assisted learning experience. [3] However, the teacher has to constantly keep an eye on the psychological atmosphere predominating among the students in mixed-ability classes as the chances of developing superiority complexes (advanced learners may be prone to it) and feeling of inferiority (inherent to weak students) are rather high in such groups.

The teacher of a mixed-ability class should be aware of typical problems arising in the mixed-ability groups and possible ways to solve them. One of the

common problem to be solved revolves around the high probability of developing inferiority complexes leading to demotivation of average students. Our observations have proved that the main factor affecting the participation in speaking activity within a given communicative situation is neither the absence of the necessary basic knowledge on the subject (so-called lexical and grammatical minimum), nor a lack of a wish to carry on a conversation on a given topic, because of insufficient understanding of the subject, but the presence of psychological barrier not allowing to overcome different types of fears, e.g. the fear of making a mistake, the fear of a new activity in the presence of an audience and unwillingness to be subjected to critical evaluation by the teacher or other students.

Bearing in mind all the factors mentioned above, the task of the English language teacher of the different-level group resolves itself thereby to giving equal attention to both advanced and average students. It is quite clear that the former tends to participate more actively during the lesson, whereas the latter feels embarrassment and prefers to maintain silence. In this case, lack of due attention from the teacher or immanent restraint in communication activities may negatively affect underachievers' progress in acquiring language skills. It is important to remember that there is no use trying to force average students lacking speaking skills to talk, thereby provoking possible aggravation of the fear to make mistake and making them even less reluctant to speak in the future. It would be sensible to create amicable learning environment in the mixed-ability group, where learners are not afraid of making mistakes and being ridiculed.

Naturally, not all students are affected by the above mentioned factors. Basically, it is common for people with low self-esteem and high levels of anxiety, i.e. people experiencing psychological distress in all situations associated with the evaluation of their activities. Since learning a foreign language is associated with a large number of errors (that is surely inevitable when learning new skills), participation in speaking activities becomes a major stress for students who are seeking to meet the expectations of others and are afraid to fail (i.e. to make a mistake speaking foreign language), which is a consequence of low self-esteem and self-doubt.

Unfortunately, these psychological characteristics are inherent to a large number of students, which means that the main task of the lesson will not be accomplished and such students will not acquire communication skills, learn to use a foreign language for its intended purpose, i.e. as a means of communication. Taking into consideration all the above mentioned factors, it is important to help the teacher find the necessary solutions so that the educational process might be carried out to the full extent, while minimizing stress factors arising in the process of foreign language communication.

English language teachers dealing with a mixed-ability class have to adopt a mixture of solutions meeting the needs of both advanced and average students, simultaneously facilitating favourable and friendly atmosphere among all members of the academic group. The golden mean in treating advanced and average learners is to be found behaving in supportive and encouraging way to create successful teaching and learning environment. The outcomes of the following scientific and practical

research can be used to identify the perspective directions of studying this problem in the future. It would be appropriate to carry out in-depth analysis of psychological factors affecting the efficiency of students' progressing in acquiring language skills in different-level English classes, the questions of the application of the newest technologies in the process of teaching to mixed-ability classes that, supposedly, can be extremely helpful in solving the problem discussed require further development. Further research in this area may include the role of self-study facilities equipped with the cutting-edge appliances allowing English language teachers to concentrate on advanced learner groups and average learner groups alternately.

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