

MANAGING MIXED-ABILITY CLASSROOMS

Abstract

One of the challenges commonly confronted by many teachers all over the world is the effective management of mixed-ability classrooms. Mixed-ability classes are found in every educational institution, irrespective of its location and type. Teachers must not treat the whole class as a uniform group of the same abilities. All students have their own way of learning. It becomes problematic when the teacher does not recognize the necessity for a novel approach to manage the mixed-ability classroom. Research has proved that teachers must employ a multitude of strategies in mixed-ability classes. The teacher's positive attitude, efficient lesson planning, differentiation in teaching, use of technology, student-centered activities, increasing learners' autonomy, continuous discussions and feedback, pair work, group work, and positive relationship between teachers and students can pave the path for an effective management of the mixed-ability classes.

Keywords: Mixed-ability classes; learner-centered activities; differentiation in teaching; classroom management.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A mixed-ability classroom is a class of students with different levels of ability. Chapman and King (2003) define a mixed-ability classroom as a classroom that “consists of a group of students with differing levels of learning abilities, interests, and skills” (as cited in Al-Subaiei, 2017). According to Baker and Westrup (2000), mixed-ability classes are “academic groups of students who have varying capabilities, learning needs, learning styles, experiences, interests, motivation, language, and cultural background” (p. 25). For instance, a mixed-ability class, as used in English Language Teaching (ELT), implies a class of students with different levels of proficiency in the English language. Almost every ELT class is a mixed-ability group. A mixed-ability class means “a class where students differ greatly in ability, motivation for learning English, needs, interests, educational background, styles of learning, anxiety, experiences and so on” (Ainslie, as cited in Svard, 2006). For example, a class may be a combination of English language learners with upper-intermediate level and lower intermediate level. Today, many teachers are beset with the challenge of mixed-ability classes since most of the classes have students with different abilities, regardless of the subject or language.

Every student has individual learning needs and interests (Ireson & Hallam 2001, p. 57). Every student’s learning process is influenced by several factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, culture, attitude, intelligence, motivation, etc. As we all know, there can be a large number of learners in a classroom, and all of them can have different levels of ability. In a large class, some students can feel anxious. Some students may have low motivation. Some students can get bored or distracted easily. Some may avoid any kind of academic attempt in front of the class for fear of erring and being ridiculed upon by fellow classmates. A mixed-ability classroom makes it highly challenging for the teachers to attract the attention of all the students. Sometimes, the teacher can become apprehensive about lacking sufficient time to guide and support all the learners. It becomes difficult for the teacher to sustain the motivation and attention of all the pupils. It may be tough to motivate all students to participate in the same learning activities. Fast learners may get easily bored or feel less challenged, fearing stunted development amidst weak learners. Slow learners may find it intimidating to make mistakes in front of fast learners. They may find simple learning tasks challenging. They may develop an inferiority complex due to the impressive performance of the fast learners. In such a scenario, teachers find it daunting and time-consuming to plan different learning activities according to the diverse capacities and needs of the learners.

Some teachers quickly resort to grouping within the class. They find it convenient to divide the class into two groups and assign them tasks according to their abilities. According to Kelly (1974), grouping students into “slow” and “fast” is not effective. Grouping learners into categories can have both desirable and undesirable effects on them. One of the biggest advantages of such a grouping is that the teacher can easily plan the lesson and smoothly manage the class because almost all the learners will be at the same level of ability or proficiency in the subject. However, grouping is not recommended as distinguishing the slow learners from the fast learners can disturb the learners socially and psychologically. Being identified as slow can affect their self-image adversely (as cited in Svard, 2006). This may demean and demotivate slow learners. They may find it disparaging and humiliating to be labeled so, and may lose motivation to participate and perform in the class. Some may openly refuse to work in slow learners’ groups. On the whole, such a convenient grouping may prove completely detrimental to the learning environment.

II. ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Every learning environment calls for an appropriate approach to teaching, which suits a particular situation. Therefore, teachers assume a greater responsibility in being equal, fair, and judicious in their attitude towards all learners, despite their differences. The positive attitude of the teachers is a prerequisite for an effective learning environment conducive to the growth of all kinds of learners. It is imperative on the part of the instructors to create a congenial ethos in the classroom, where all learners feel included, identified, and respected. Ainslie (1994) highlights the need for the teacher to create a positive environment in a classroom. Wright (2005) too supports this theory as he “claims that there is a strong connection between a good classroom atmosphere and having good behaviour management. This will create a good learning situation” (as cited in Svard, 2006).

To develop a congenial learning ethos, it is indispensable for the teachers to cultivate a positive connection with the learners. To connect with the learners, teachers must strive to remember their names. Tabassum (2022) rightly observes:

Irrespective of the total number of pupils in a class or the age range of the learners, students prefer to be addressed and identified by their names and not numbers. It doesn't require extra time; it just requires the teacher's conscious and cognizant connection with the students. (p. 62)

Teachers must try to know and understand their students' needs, interests, difficulties, and backgrounds. This familiarization process should begin in the very first few classes of the course. This enables the learners to feel recognized and respected as individuals and fosters a better rapport with the teacher (Hess, 2001). Teachers should not focus on correcting all the mistakes of the learners as this may discourage and demotivate them from attempting. Lessow-Hurley (2003) holds that instead of accuracy, teachers must encourage communicative competence. Teachers must create such an atmosphere in the classroom that is conducive for active participation of the students. Learners should find it acceptable to make mistakes. This reduces anxiety among the learners to a great extent.

It is indispensable for the teacher to not only bear but also express enthusiasm for the subject-matter. The teacher must enjoy teaching. This enjoyment is contagious. Students pick up the positive vibes from their teacher and develop a positive attitude towards what is being taught. According to Dörnyei (2001), “enthusiasm for one's specialization area and the ability to make this enthusiasm public rather than hiding it, is one of the most important ingredients of motivationally successful teaching” (as cited in Svard, 2006).

III. STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING MIXED-ABILITY CLASSROOMS

Besides creating a positive learning environment, teachers can clearly set and explain all the rules and expectations as regards classroom demeanor so that students are acquainted with the classroom discipline and decorum. This will avoid any kind of disturbance and will facilitate the smooth conduct of the teaching-learning session. Teachers must familiarize the students with proper rules for desirable classroom behaviour (Bowman et al., 1992). It is better for the teachers to be well-planned, and impress students as being highly-organized and prepared. Teachers can explain to students what, why, and how they are going to learn in a particular session. The session could begin with expectations, and conclude with the plan for

the next class, so that the students prepare themselves accordingly. Such a stable and structured teaching approach proves to be highly beneficial to the slow learners (Bowman et al., 1992).

Mixed-ability classes can be effectively managed when the teacher imparts clear information and instructions for any session. Tabassum (2022) asserts, “When teachers make their expectations explicit in the first few sessions, students can discern what is appreciated and what is condemned and, thereby, develop a sense of discipline and respect for the course, the class and the teacher” (p. 62). When learners understand what and how they have to do any task clearly, they find it manageable to execute it. The teacher must clarify the instructions in various ways such as oral, written, using gestures, demonstration, etc. The teacher could use an overhead projector or write on the board (Kelly, as cited in Svard, 2006). Examples and illustrations facilitate better comprehension of the given explanation. After giving clear instructions, students should be given adequate time to think, plan, and discuss with their peers before embarking on the activity. Bigger tasks could be carried out in simple, manageable steps. If the students are not clear or sure about what and how they have to do a certain activity, it can become increasingly challenging for both students and teacher to manage the situation. When the teacher is not very clear about what is expected of the students and what they have to do, students may feel perplexed and unsure; some may lose interest and motivation, while others may find it boring and insipid (Baker & Westrup, 2000).

Brown (2002) points out that since all learners have their own styles of learning, they should be motivated to develop their own learning strategies and study skills. There should be ample opportunities provided by the teacher for the students to learn inside and outside the classroom and discover what learning strategies and study skills are effective for them. Hess (2001) highlights the use of checklists. The teacher can provide checklists to the students to check their progress and monitor their learning. However, learning does not take place despite the remarkable efforts of the teachers if the learners are not motivated to learn and participate actively in the various learning tasks (Hess, 2001, p. 159). Hence, Hess also emphasizes the need for students’ active participation and cooperation during the learning process.

The classroom should be built upon the principles of cooperation and collaboration. The teacher must instil these values in the learners through various tasks in the learning process. Commenting on how teachers can promote collaboration, Tabassum (2023b) elaborates:

Teachers aiming at collaborative learning make such learning arrangements that engage the learners actively. They try to establish a learning environment that is not only conducive to but also promotes active and interactive participation of the students in the learning process, where learners can coordinate and cooperate with one another to achieve common learning goals. Students are assigned tasks to work in pairs or groups. (p. 223)

Students must be engaged in activities that involve pair-work and group work, so that they learn to coordinate with one another to execute any assigned task. Teachers should promote and reinforce mutual cooperation and peer feedback for improvement. Helping one another and giving constructive feedback to peers pave the way for more responsible self-learning.

As Goldstein and Mather (1998) rightly point out, the goal for every teacher should be that students assume responsibility for their own learning which can be achieved through guiding students to plan their progress and cultivate study skills for independent learning. Guiding the learners to take responsibility strengthens their self-esteem. Here, positive feedback plays an important role. Encouraging comments by the teacher push students towards improved performance.

Learner-centered activities can prove to be highly instrumental in effective management of mixed-ability classes. The teacher must take into cognizance and consideration, the learners' ideas, interests, and abilities, when planning lessons and activities. Students must be encouraged to express their ideas and share their experiences. Hess (2001) repeatedly stresses the significance of students exchanging their ideas, experiences, and future plans. Teachers must not curb but rather initiate and appreciate students' free discussion of matters relevant to the lesson. They must serve as facilitators in shaping the class discussion into the right direction. As suggested by Goldstein and Mather (1998), pre-teaching activities such as asking questions by showing pictures or discussing the titles makes the students think about the text. They think critically and make inferences about the text. When such a method is used, students start analyzing the content and comprehend it better. Warm-up activities, ice-breakers, and elicitation strategies motivate all types of learners.

Integration of technology can also amuse, attract, and motivate all learners equally. Use of computers, smart phones, learning games, smart boards, PowerPoint presentations, videos, and other technology-based activities add fun to learning and render the whole learning experience enjoyable and effective. Tabassum (2023a) argues, "A technology-integrated, student-centric learning environment elevates students' potential and increases their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for studies, facilitating the holistic development of their personalities" (p. 123). Green (2000) insists that the use of technology, involving computer-based tasks, excites and enthuses students of all ages (as cited in Svard, 2006). He maintains that students enjoy learning while using computers. They can search for information, learn vocabulary, practice grammar, and write letters or emails on computers.

Differentiation is another significant player in enhancing teaching in a mixed-ability classroom. Differentiated instruction implies modification of the teaching content and style in accordance with individual learner's needs and interests. Instruction is tailored to meet individual needs. The purpose of differentiation is to cater to all students. Suitable challenges of varying difficulty levels could be planned and rendered to students of different abilities to ensure optimum participation and enjoyment of the learning process. Tomlinson (2005) recommends that differentiation is required in three distinct areas of instruction: the material, the process, and the product. Various short stories, songs, plays, poems, articles, films, videos, radio programs, etc. could be used to make the material differentiated. A plethora of classroom activities such as discussions, group work, pair work, individual work, etc could be used to add differentiation to the process. Different kinds of presentations and oral and written methods of demonstrating learning render the product differentiated. Ainslie (1994) also confirms the indispensability of differentiation in mixed-ability classes (as cited in Svard, 2006). A differentiated classroom can become effective when learners sometimes can choose their topics and material. Bowman et al. (1992) state, "Students are very resourceful. They can create problems or generate solutions, depending on how you engage and maintain

their attention” (p. 23). Thus, teachers' methods and techniques of teaching contribute significantly towards infusing differentiation in the learning environment.

Although activities and exercises could be differentiated as challenging or easy, teachers must communicate equally with the whole class. They should avoid favoritism or picking the same students for responses or tasks. More appreciation of every student's effort elevates their motivation towards active participation in the learning process. Teachers are recommended to remember the famous ratio 1:5, one negative comment should be counteracted with five positive comments. This elevates students' motivation, prevents them from a negative attitude, and encourages them for better performance.

Besides these strategies, mixed-ability classes can be better managed with efficient planning and structure of the teaching and learning sessions so that tasks and activities cater to students of all levels of abilities. Teachers must be organized, and create ongoing activities. Those students, who complete their work faster than others, could be given other individual tasks to keep them occupied and challenged. After completing the class activity, they could write a journal or engage in any other meaningful task. If the teacher pairs students as one fast learner and one slow learner, such pairs interact and guide each other on a private level. The faster learners tend to assume greater responsibility and the slow learners will receive the needed guidance and help from their peers. However, the teachers should not make the criterion of pairing very obvious in the class, and be sensitive to the feelings of all the students.

In a mixed-ability classroom, students tend to learn better when they are given the space to learn at their own pace (Hess, 2001, p, 78). Teachers must encourage discussion amongst the students on pertinent matters such as assignments, activities, etc. They can pair or group students with different abilities for various tasks, and plan and assign extension tasks to those students who finish the activities early. Ireson and Hallam (2001) argue that it is natural for the students to have different interests, needs, and abilities, and teachers must appreciate these differences. Students are bound to have different learning styles and preferences, and teachers must try to accommodate these in the teaching process (p. 56). Learning is enhanced dramatically when the teacher pays attention to the learning styles of the students, and when the learners can connect the learning material to the information already acquired and one's own learning style. The teacher must aim at bringing about an improvement in the students' performance and skills through different useful strategies (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 262).

Teachers can help students know and understand their own learning styles, and discover the learning strategies and develop the study skills that are useful to them (Brown, 2022, p. 67). They must encourage collaboration and cooperation among the students, and promote exchanging of feedback amongst them (Hess, 2001, p. 78). This would allow them to take responsibilities. A technique that works very effectively in a mixed-ability classroom is giving clear instructions. Simple instructions in an easy-to-understand language prevents miscommunication and saves time in the class as students can comprehend the teacher's statements faster (Brown, 2002, p. 61). Students comprehend better when teachers use different methods of teaching. Different methods of explanation should be used to introduce the tasks (Baker & Westrup, 2000, p. 45). Pertinent and concrete examples must be cited to support the explanation. Adequate time must be given to the students to think and comprehend, and deliberate with their peers to get their doubts clarified. The content of

instruction and activities should be tailored in accordance with the learners' needs, which can be observed by the teachers when students express themselves freely through writing or speaking.

To enable students to benefit the most from the classes, the lesson must be planned and implemented keeping in view the different abilities of the students. Possible challenges and solutions must be considered while planning for the future classes (Baker & Westrup, 2000, p. 48). It is unfortunate that most curricula are designed and learning materials are developed for average students. The teacher must adapt the material, modify the content, or design new material to enhance teaching for all the students in a mixed group. Some students may find the textbook homework difficult. Consequently, they may not be able to submit their assignments; thus they are slow in their learning, while the other students progress smoothly. The teachers tend to match the pace of such average learners. However, in order to ensure that slow learners get to learn equally, the teacher can modify the homework and the assignments for them. The teacher can make certain changes to simplify the homework, such as reducing the confusing options in the multiple choice questions. The teacher must focus more on the slow learners, while keeping the fast learners challenged. The teacher must identify the strengths of the students based on their participation and performance, and not concentrate only on the extroverted students but also urge the reticent ones to make contribution to the class discussion and activities.

IV. CONCLUSION

Mixed-ability classes offer many challenges to the teacher. However, they do have their diverse strengths too. The instructors could capitalize on these strengths by planning for tasks to keep all students engaged. Moreover, teachers who are positive towards the students' diversity and who respect and appreciate their differences are likely to perform better in mixed-ability classrooms. Efficient planning for particular tasks to cater to the students with all levels of abilities will ensure effective management of a mixed-ability class. Thus, despite all the challenges posed by the diversity in students' learning abilities, needs, interests, and styles, the teacher's appreciation of the students' differences, positive attitude, healthy relationship with students, efficient lesson planning, differentiation in teaching, use of technology, and student-centered activities facilitate an effective management of mixed-ability classes.

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