

All classes are mixed ability classes. Sometimes, particularly with adults, the level of the students may be more or less homogenous, but in secondary schools most classes have a wide range of levels and abilities.

Developing a teaching approach to deal with such diversity in one class seems to be an almost impossible demand. In this article I want to look

everyone has something special to offer to the class. I have to help them all to progress together, and they have to learn how to value each other's skills. It is an inclusive classroom.'

A metaphor of a mixed ability class which works for me is to think of the class as a lift (elevator). Everyone needs to get into the lift to start with. Some students will run into the lift, some will

Mixed Ability an 'inclusive' classroom

Jim Rose looks positively at mixed ability classes and suggests some appropriate teaching approaches.

at mixed ability teaching from a fresh angle, viewing the mixture of skills and abilities as a positive factor and suggesting some appropriate teaching approaches. I then want to ask 'What makes a successful mixed ability activity?' and show some simple ways to modify material to make it suitable for a range of abilities.

have to be dragged in. Some students will travel right to the top of the building, some may stop at the third floor and some may only reach the first floor, but everyone will have travelled somewhere successfully. At the end of a class, every student can leave the room feeling that they have been challenged and that they have achieved something.

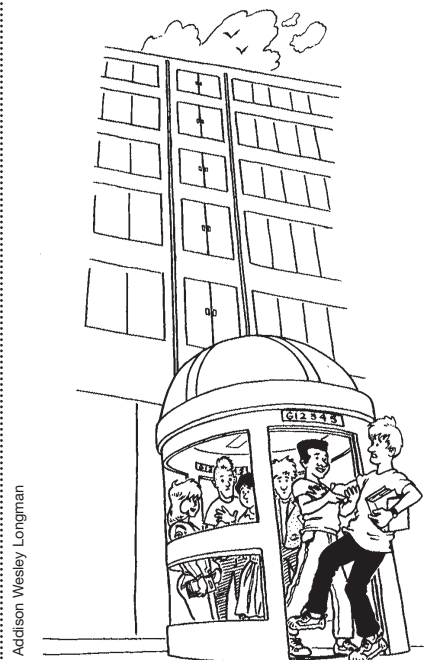
What is mixed ability?

Here are two possible answers to this question from a teacher's point of view:

'Students used to be split according to their abilities into 'streams'. Now all the students are mixed together in one class. There are good students, average students, and bad students. I can't teach three different levels at the same time so I aim the lessons at the average students. I can't really challenge the good students and the bad students aren't interested anyway, so they tend to get excluded.'

Here is a different way of viewing mixed ability:

'The learners have different linguistic abilities but for different reasons. They have a range of non-linguistic skills so



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Why are some students 'worse' than others?

It is very easy to label a student as 'good' or 'bad' and then expect them to match the label ever after, but there are a number of reasons why learners may be better or worse at English. Many of the reasons are temporary and can be overcome.

- They have a different starting point. Perhaps they learnt or did not learn English at primary school or kindergarten.
- They have had a very poor teacher.
- They have missed out on an important stage of learning but have good skills in a different area.

What is needed most is a change of emphasis

- They have been labelled as 'bad at English' and now they believe it, so why bother? They are bored and demoralised.
- They are less mature than other students or lack confidence to get involved.

So, in fact, there are good reasons why a less able student may, potentially, be a good language learner. It is this realisation that has undermined the old idea of streaming where, once labelled, a student got stuck.

A mixed ability class should offer all the students in it an appropriate challenge to help them to progress *in their own terms*. Unfortunately, we all have to work within the bureaucracy of education - exams, tests and so on - in other words *in someone else's terms*. If classes operate a dividing line of 'pass' and 'fail' in everyday activities, it can

create a sense of failure and a feeling that the task of learning is too hard. As teachers, we can be much more than educational bureaucrats - we can offer the chance of real educational and linguistic progress together, and we can make it fun too.

What are the characteristics of good mixed ability classes?

The thought of having to develop a completely new approach in order to deal with mixed ability teaching is understandably frightening. In practice, what is needed most is a change of emphasis in the classroom to create the context where all the learners feel valuable and have the space and confidence to try. All these

characteristics share a common feature - they aim to make the classroom *inclusive* for all students:

- There is a sense of discipline and shared purpose in the class. The students have learned to work together and to be self-directed for short periods.
- Both linguistic and non-linguistic skills are valued and everyone can contribute even if the contributions are not linguistic.
- Students' work and drawings are displayed on the wall or kept in a class folder that is regularly reviewed. All the students in the class will be involved and each student will have something appropriately challenging to work on.
- To provide a range of challenges for different abilities, there will be a range

of achievable objectives for many tasks. Many of these objectives will be small and immediate, like learning five new words, saying one sentence correctly or repeating an earlier exercise and getting it right.

- There will be time and space for everyone to *think*. Students learn that they don't need to think when the teacher asks a question because the most able students will answer. They can be encouraged to note down the answer or put up their hands briefly when they know, without giving the answer. This way, *all* students in the class will have the chance to think about the question.

- There will be opportunities for regular assessment against a *personal* standard. For example, 'I got 3 sentences right last time and 5 right this time!' is a great step forward. If students are helped to measure themselves against their own personal achievements, all students, including the stronger ones, can focus on improving their own performance and a value can be placed on the *effort* they have made. Students in this class will have regular opportunities to find out how they are progressing.

- The syllabus will be planned to allow a different rate of progress within each lesson, so that students can work at the best speed for them. However, the general pace of the syllabus will be the same for all students - they can all feel that they are learning together. The more able students will learn more vocabulary and engage in more challenging practice.

What makes a successful mixed ability activity?

Activities need to be quick and easy to prepare and they need to take account of the practicalities of teaching.

In the following activity, there is little extra preparation because it uses one piece of material - a standard coursebook dialogue. Memorisation is the common starting point (to get all the students into the lift) while the dialogue is a springboard for more challenging work (which will take them to different storeys of the building).

Safestart Dialogue

Addison Wesley Longman



Karini: Who's that?
Helen: My mum. She's a teacher.
Karini: Is that your father?
Helen: Yes. He's an architect.
 And that's my sister.
 She's called Theresa.
Karini: How old is she?
Helen: She's twenty-two.
 She's a student.

The teacher writes the dialogue on the board and establishes the context from the picture. If this part of the lesson is conducted in the students' own language then all students can participate.

The students take the parts of Helen and Karini and say the dialogue in pairs.

They do it again, and again. Each time, the teacher erases a few more words until the students can repeat the dialogue from memory.

Now the students draw a picture of three or four people in their real families.

The students then talk about their pictures using the questions and answers they have memorised as a basis. Every

student will have something to say and will be able to participate in the activity. The better students will be able to communicate more.

This activity has several features that make it suitable for mixed ability teaching:

- The starting points are the same for all the students - predicting the context in their own language, then memorising.
- The starting points don't depend upon previous linguistic knowledge. Other non-linguistic starting points might be: using music, drawing or painting, miming, generating ideas or sharing world knowledge in their own language.
- Both linguistic and non-linguistic skills are integral to the success of the activity.
- There is more than one objective - memorisation, drawing, a simple controlled dialogue, a dialogue departing further from the memorised model.

Every conversation in this activity, however fluent or halting it may be, is a success because students are asking and answering something real about their families.

How to modify tasks

Most tasks can be modified simply to provide a non-linguistic objective by adding an element of discussion in their own language or incorporating maths, drawing a diagram, or a performance task and so on. Two or three levels of linguistic difficulty can also be added by providing steps or stages to make them easier.

For example, in the following listening task, the students have to write the names of the rooms corresponding to the letters on the plan of the ship. In the box below, however, the task is made easier for weaker students by giving

them options to choose from. This reduces the amount of information they have to listen for.

Similarly, questions for a reading text can offer options:

Why doesn't Vinnie like Malek?

Malek's new at the school. He can't play football. He's got long hair.

Who wins the race?
 Is it Pat, Vinnie or Malek?


Malek.

Students can learn to decide for themselves which level of task they want to do. At first they may choose inappropriately (but remember that a single objective activity is already inappropriate for many students).

After a while they will start to choose the level which challenges them best because it is boring doing tasks that are too easy or too challenging all the time.

Each student has a different learning profile too, so a student may, for example, choose an easier task for a grammar exercise because s/he recognises where her/his strengths and weaknesses lie.

Small successes

There is a simple idea behind all this: just as learners need achievable objectives and plenty of small successes to stay motivated, so do teachers. If we think that we have to retrain completely or spend every evening preparing new materials to cope with mixed ability classes, then only seriously dedicated teachers will do so, and then not always. In fact, we can start taking the small but significant steps towards an inclusive classroom now. 



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Listen and circle the names of the rooms

