how to Teach English

An introduction to the practice of English language teaching

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What if students are all at different levels?

One of the biggest problems teachers face is a lesson where the students are at different levels – some with quite competent English, some whose English isn't very good, and some whose English is only just getting started. As with many other classroom subjects, teachers face this problem every day unless the most rigorous selection has taken place. What then are the possible ways of dealing with the situation?

Use different materials: when teachers know who the good and less good students are, they can form different groups. While one group is working on a piece of language study (e.g. the past continuous), the other group might be reading a story or doing a more advanced grammar exercise. Later, while the better group or groups are discussing a topic, the weaker group or groups might be doing a parallel writing exercise, or sitting round a tape recorder listening to a tape.

In schools where there are self-study facilities (a study centre, or separate rooms), the teacher can send one group of students off to work there in order to concentrate on another. Provided the self-study task is purposeful, the students who go out of the classroom will not feel cheated.

If the self-study area is big enough, of course, it is an ideal place for different-level learning. While one group is working on a grammar activity in one corner, two other students can be listening to a tape and another group again will be consulting an encyclopedia while a different set of colleagues is working at a computer screen.

Do different tasks with the same material: where teachers use the same material with the whole class, they can encourage students to do different tasks depending on their abilities. A reading text can

have questions at three different levels, for example. The teacher tells the students to see how far they can get: the better ones will quickly finish the first two and have to work hard on the third. The weakest students may not get past the first task.

In a language study exercise, the teacher can ask for simple repetition from some students, but ask others to use the new language in more complex sentences. If the teacher is getting students to give answers or opinions, she can make it clear that one word will do for some students whereas longer and more complex contributions are expected from others. Lastly, in role-plays and other speaking or group activities, she can ensure that students have roles or functions which are appropriate to their level.

Ignore the problem: it is perfectly feasible to hold the belief that, within a heterogeneous group, students will find their own level. In speaking and writing activities, for example, the better students will probably be more daring, in reading and listening, they will understand more completely and more quickly. However, the danger of this position is that students will either be bored by the slowness of their colleagues or frustrated by their inability to keep up.

Use the students: some teachers adopt a strategy of peer help and teaching so that better students can help weaker ones. They can work with them in pairs or groups, explaining things, or providing good models of language performance in speaking and writing. Thus, when teachers put students in groups, they can ensure that weak and strong students are put together. However, this has to be done with great sensitivity so that students don't get alienated by their over-knowledgeable peers or oppressed by their obligatory teaching role.

Many teachers, faced with students at different levels, adopt a mixture of solutions like the ones we have suggested here.

What if the class is very big?

In big classes, it is difficult for the teacher to make contact with the students at the back and it is difficult for the students to ask for and receive individual attention. It may seem impossible to organise dynamic and creative teaching and learning sessions. Frequently, big classes mean that it is not easy to have students walking around or changing pairs etc. Most importantly, big classes can be quite intimidating for inexperienced teachers.

Despite the problems of big classes, there are things which teachers can do.

Use worksheets: one solution is for teachers to hand out worksheets for many of the tasks which they would normally do with the whole class – if the class was smaller. When the feedback stage is reached, teachers can go through the worksheets with the whole group – and all the students will get the benefit.

Use pairwork and groupwork: in large classes, pairwork and groupwork

play an important part since they maximise student participation. Even where chairs and desks cannot be moved, there are ways of doing this: first rows turn to face second rows, third rows to face fourth rows etc.

When using pairwork and groupwork with large groups, it is important to make instructions especially clear, to agree how to stop the activity (many teachers just raise their hands until students notice them and gradually quieten down) and to give good feedback.

Use chorus reaction: since it becomes difficult to use a lot of individual repetition and controlled practice in a big group, it may be more appropriate to use students in chorus. The class can be divided into two halves – the front five rows and the back five rows, for example, or the left-hand and right-hand sides of the classroom. Each row/half can then speak a part in a dialogue, ask or answer a question, repeat sentences or words. This is especially useful at lower levels.

Use group leaders: teachers can enlist the help of a few group leaders. They can be used to hand out copies, check that everyone in their group (or row or half) has understood a task, collect work and give feedback.

Think about vision and acoustics: big classes often are (but not always) in big rooms. Teachers have to make sure that what they show or write can be seen and that what they say or play to the whole group can be heard.

Use the size of the group to your advantage: big groups have disadvantages of course, but they also have one main advantage – they are bigger, so that humour, for example, is funnier, drama is more dramatic, a good class feeling is warmer and more enveloping. Experienced teachers use this potential to organise exciting and involving classes.

No-one chooses to have a large group: it makes the job of teaching even more challenging than it already is. However, teachers do find themselves, in various teaching situations around the world, dealing with groups of thirty, or fifty, or even sometimes above and beyond a hundred students. Some of the suggestions above will help to turn a potential disaster into some kind of a success.

What if students keep using their own language?

One of the problems that teachers sometimes face with students who all share the same native language is that they use their native language rather than English to perform classroom tasks. This may be because they want to communicate something important, and so they use language in the best way they know! They will almost certainly find speaking in their language a lot easier than struggling with English.

But, however much teachers might sympathise with their students, the need to have them practising English (rather than their own language) remains paramount.

There are a number of things that can be done in this situation.

Talk to them about the issues: teachers can discuss with students how

they should all feel about using English and/or their own language in the class. Teachers should try to get their students' agreement that overuse of their own language means that they will have less chance to learn English; that using their own language during speaking activities denies them chances for rehearsal and feedback.

Encourage them to use English appropriately: teachers should make it clear that there is not a total ban on their own language – it depends on what's happening. In other words, a little bit of the students' native language when they're working on a reading text is not too much of a problem, but a speaking *Activate* exercise will lose its purpose if not done in English.

Only respond to English use: teachers can make it clear by their behaviour that they want to hear English. They can ignore what students say in their own language.

Create an English environment: teachers themselves should speak English for the majority of the time, so that, together with the use of listening material and video, the students are constantly exposed to how English sounds, and what it feels like. Some teachers anglicise their students' names too.

Keep reminding them: teachers should be prepared to go round the class during a speaking exercise encouraging, cajoling, even pleading with them to use English – and offering help if necessary. This technique, often repeated, will gradually change most students' behaviour over a period of time.

What if students are uncooperative?

All experienced teachers will remember students they have not enjoyed working with, and most teachers can recall times when students were deliberately uncooperative, sometimes to a point of great discomfort for the teacher.

Lack of cooperation can take many forms: constant chattering in class, not listening to the teacher, failure to do any homework, blunt refusal to do certain activities, constant lateness and even rudeness. Sometimes, things get so bad that students complain to someone in authority.

There are a number of things teachers can do to try and solve the problems of uncooperative classes.

Talk to individuals: teachers can speak to individual members of the class outside the classroom. They can ask them what they feel about the class, why there's a problem and what they think can be done about it.

Write to individuals: the same effect can be achieved simultaneously with all students by writing them a (confidential) letter. In the letter, the teacher says that she thinks there's a serious problem in the class and that she wants to know what can be done about it. Students can be invited to write back in complete confidence. The replies which are received

(and not all students will reply) will show what some of the problems are.

The only disadvantage to having students write to the teacher individually is that the teacher then has to write back to each of them!

Use activities: teachers can make it clear that some of the more enjoyable activities which students like to do will only be used when the class is functioning properly. Otherwise, they will be forced to fall back on more formal teaching and language study.

Enlist help: teachers should not have to suffer on their own! They should talk to colleagues and, if possible, get a friend to come and observe the class to see if they notice things that the teacher himself or herself is not aware of.

Make a language-learning contract: teachers can talk directly to the students about issues of teaching and learning. They can get the students' agreement to ways of behaving and find out what they expect or need from the teacher. This is the forming of a language-learning 'contract' and subjects covered can include such things as when the students should not use their language, what teachers expect from homework, arriving on time etc. But teachers will have to bind themselves to good teacher behaviour too.

When the contract is concluded, it forms a behaviour blueprint for everyone, and if students have said that they don't want people to talk in class all the time, for example, then they are likely to ensure that it doesn't happen often.

What if students don't want to talk?

Many teachers have come across students who don't seem to want to talk in class. Sometimes, this may have to do with the students' own characters. Sometimes, it is because there are other students who dominate and almost intimidate. Sometimes, it is because students are simply not used to talking freely – for reasons of culture and background. Perhaps, in their culture, women are traditionally expected to remain quiet in a mixed-sex group. Perhaps their culture finds in modesty a positive virtue. Perhaps they suffer from a fear of making mistakes and therefore 'losing face' in front of the teacher and their peers.

Whatever the reason, it makes no sense to try and bully such students into talking. It will probably only make them more reluctant to speak. There are other much better things to try.

Use pairwork: pairwork (and groupwork) will help to provoke quiet students into talking. When they are with one or perhaps two or three other students, they are not under so much pressure as they are if asked to speak in front of the whole class.

Allow them to speak in a controlled way at first: asking quiet students for instant fluency may be doomed to failure, initially. It is better to do it in stages, as in the following example. The teacher can dictate sentences which the students only have to fill in parts of before reading them out.

Thus, the teacher dictates 'One of the most beautiful things I have ever seen is ...' and the students have to complete it for themselves. They then read out their sentences, e.g. 'One of the most beautiful things I have ever seen is Mount Fuji at sunset' etc.

In general, it may be a good idea to let students write down what they are going to say before they say it. Reading sentences aloud does not demand the kind of risk-taking fluency which spontaneous conversation does. But once students have read out their sentences, the teacher or other students can ask them questions. Psychologically, they are more likely to be able to respond.

Use 'acting out' and reading aloud: getting students to act out dialogues is one way of encouraging quiet students. However, acting out does not just mean reading aloud. The teacher has to work with the students like a drama coach, working out when the voice should rise and fall, where the emphasis goes, what emotion the actor should try to convey. When the student then acts out the role, the teacher can be confident that it will sound good.

Use role-play: many teachers have found that quiet students speak more freely when they are playing a role – when they are not having to be themselves, in other words. As in our example on page 92, the use of role cards allows students to take on a new identity, one in which they can behave in uncharacteristic ways. It can be very liberating.

Use the tape recorder: if teachers have time, they can tell students to record what they would like to say, outside the lesson. The teacher then listens to the tape and points out possible errors. The student now has a chance to produce a more correct version when the lesson comes round, thus avoiding the embarrassment (for them) of making mistakes.

In Chapter 2, we said that a good student shows a willingness to experiment, to 'have a go'. Some students, however, feel inhibited about this, especially where speaking is concerned. The activities above are ways of getting them to change.

What if students don't understand the listening tape?

Sometimes, despite the teacher's best judgement – or the judgement of a textbook writer – listening material on tape seems to be too difficult for students to understand. However many times the teacher plays the tape (and after the third or fourth listening, the teacher and the students will be getting fairly desperate), it just doesn't work. The teacher abandons the activity and a general depression ensues.

There are a number of alternatives to this scenario which might help.

Introduce interview questions: if students find (or will find) an interview difficult, they can be given the questions first and encouraged to role-play the interview before listening to it. This will have great predictive power.

Use 'jigsaw listening': different groups can be given different taped excerpts (either on tape or – for some of them – as tapescripts). When the

groups hear about each others' extracts, they can get the whole picture by putting the 'jigsaw' pieces together.

One task only: students can be given a straightforward task which does not demand too much detailed understanding. A useful possibility is to get them to describe the speaker on the tape – the sound of the voice will suggest sex, age, status etc.

Play a/the first segment only: instead of playing the whole tape, teachers can just play the first segment and then let students predict what's coming next. Our third example in Chapter 10 (see pages 104-6) was a version of this.

Use the tapescript (1): it can be cut into bits. The students put them in the right order as they listen.

Use the tapescript (2): the students can look at the tapescript of the first segment to give them confidence and ensure that they know what the tape is about.

Use the tapescript (3): students can read the tapescript before, during and after they listen. The tapescript can also have words or phrases blanked out.

Use vocabulary prediction: students can be given 'key' vocabulary before they listen again. They can then be asked to predict what the tape will be about and, because they now know some of the words, they may well understand more.

What if some students-in-groups finish before everybody else?

When teachers put students in groups and ask them to complete a task – designing a poster, discussing a reading text etc. – they can be sure that some groups will finish before others. If the activity has a competitive element (for example, who can solve a problem first), this is not a worry. But where no such element is present, the teacher is put in a quandary: should he stop the activity (which means not letting some finish) or let the others finish (which means boring the people who finished first)?

As in so many other cases, common sense has to prevail here. If only one group finishes way before the others, the teacher can work with that group or provide them with some 'spare activity' material. If only one group is left without having finished, the teacher may decide to stop the activity anyway – because the rest of the class shouldn't be kept waiting.

One way of dealing with the problem is for the teacher to carry around a selection of 'spare activities' – little worksheets, puzzles, readings etc. – which can be done quickly (in just a few minutes) and which will keep the early-finishing students happy until the others have caught up. Another solution is to plan extensions to the original task so that, if groups finish early, they can do extra work on it.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have

- talked about the problem of teaching mixed ability classes, suggesting either different material, different tasks, ignoring the problem or using students as ways of dealing with it.
- discussed the issue of large classes, suggesting ways of coping with them such as using worksheets, using pairwork and groupwork, using chorus reaction, using group leaders, thinking about vision and acoustics, and using the size of the group to your advantage.
- looked at solutions to the problem of students using their own language when we want them to be using English. We suggested talking to students about the issue, encouraging them to use English appropriately, only responding to English use, creating an English environment and continuing to remind them of the issue.
- studied the issue of uncooperative students, suggesting that where there is trouble we can talk to individuals, write to individuals, use activities, enlist help and get agreement on a language-learning contract.
- faced the problem of students who are reluctant to speak. Possible solutions included using pairwork, allowing students to speak in a controlled way first, using acting out and reading aloud, and using role-play.
- worried about situations where students are having real trouble with listening material. Among many alternatives, we can give them interview questions before they listen (again), give them different bits of the tape 'jigsaw', concentrate on one simple listening task only, only play the (first) bit of the tape, use the tapescript in a variety of ways and, finally, get students to predict listening content by giving them key vocabulary.
- suggested that teachers should always have some spare activities 'up their sleeve' for situations where some groups finish long before others.