

Teaching Mixed Ability Classes

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Introduction

During the two-week teacher training course at Homerton College, I benefitted a lot, not only immersing in British culture but also acquiring lots of practical teaching strategies. Among these sessions, there is one topic “Dealing with a Multilevel Class”, that I decided to study further because I thought it corresponds to the current elementary English education in Taiwan.

This issue deserves every teacher’s attention because actually, all classes are mixed ability to a certain extent. Especially nowadays more and more children in Taiwan receive their English education at young ages, either in bilingual kindergartens or in private organizations before they attend the elementary schools. Since children receive English education at different ages, it’s inevitable that students’ English proficiency vary greatly. It’s a big challenge for teachers to meet students’ different needs in a large multilevel class since the students are from different backgrounds, with varied English proficiency and different English learning experience. Teachers may feel easily frustrated because it is hard to decide where to start. Usually most of the teachers can aim the lessons towards the average students. However, sometimes it may turn out that stronger learners get bored and weaker students don’t even try.

In the “Dealing with a Multiple Class” session, our instructor at Homerton College led us to discuss some strategies that can be applied in mixed ability classes. For example, we can adapt teaching materials to fit different levels of learners. In this article, I am going to introduce some of the strategies that were discussed in class and talk about some other strategies that teachers can apply to maximize students’ learning. Also I am going to talk

about one of the strategies that I have applied in my class. I hope that to some extent, this can help teachers deal with mixed ability classes.

Strategies for Teaching in Mixed Ability Classes

Strategy 1: Know your students well

I think this is absolutely the most important strategy and the most important thing that every teacher should do at the very beginning. Once you know your students better, like their personalities, English proficiency and learning styles, it will be easier to find ways to help them or to group them either in a homogeneous or heterogeneous way. You can use a questionnaire, student feedback and formal or informal testing to understand your students. Creating a portfolio of activities students have completed in class will also be helpful to know your students better.

Take learning styles for example, you will find they may learn to use different learning styles. Some students learn best when they have seen, some remember best when they have heard while some may remember things well when they've experienced. Based on this, one point that we should keep in mind is that if a teacher only caters for a certain type of learner, then those with other learning types will fall behind. Therefore, as a teacher, we should notice whether we make a conscious effort to vary our teaching approaches. For example, you can have some energetic activities for high energy learners like run and touch, running dictation, music chair while giving memory games, puzzles, dictation for low energy learners. For some visual learners, you can have them do board games while for auditory learners, you can have some rhyming word games or read aloud activities. Sometimes for your own convenience, you can even make a chart to categorize these activities. Next time when you want to choose activities, you can easily find a balance between different learners. That can help you save time and choose suitable activities for your students. (See Table 1 below)



















	High Energy Learners	Low Energy Learners
Activities	1. Run and touch 	1. Wordsearch 
	2. Run and write 	2. Memory games 
	3. Pictionary 	3. A story with mistakes  or 
	4. Music Chair 	4. Odd-one-out 
	5. Simon says 	5. Spelling test 
	6. Running dictation 	6. Dictation 
	7. Charades 	7. Board game 
 Tactile and Kinesthetic Learners	 Visual Learners	 Auditory Learners

Table 1 Activities for different types of learners

Strategy 2: Grading tasks

The idea here is that students work on the same activity but with different tasks graded at varying levels of difficulty. Teachers have to adapt tasks for more challenging or less challenging versions and students can choose which version they would like to do. Here I am going to mention some ideas that were discussed in class at Homerton College. Take wordsearch for example, usually it only requires students to recognize words in the square. We can make it more challenging:

-Have students fill in the blank, e.g. l__ __e, w__ __ c__, and then find the words.

-Have students finish anagrams and then find the words.

-Give them pictures of the words and then find the words.

-Tell them there are 20 words in the word square that they can find in the classroom.

-Have them find their classmates' names in the word square.

-Tell them to find as many "things in the classroom" as they can.

-Tell them a topic and they have to brainstorm as many words as they can.

- Tell them definitions of the words, they have to come up with the words and find them out.
- Have students create their own wordsearch.

Now let's look at another example of making a task less challenging. We can give students a short passage with a number of words wrong in it and have students find the wrong words and replace them with the correct ones. Here are the ideas of adjusting the task and make it easier:

- Tell students how many wrong words there are in the passage. They have to identify and correct them.
- Tell the students which line the wrong words are in and the number of the wrong words in each line. Students identify and correct them.
- Make sure students correctly identify the mistakes (e.g. via answer sheets) and then have them go on to correct the mistakes.
- Teachers underline the mistakes before giving texts to students and have students correct them.
- Give a mixed list of the correct words to substitute the wrong ones.

The advantage of this strategy is that students are challenged at an appropriate level of difficulty and can get involved. The problem with this strategy is that teachers may spend a lot of preparation time and students may feel labeled as either strong or weak.

Strategy 3: Extension activities and more support

The idea here is that teachers use the same materials as a starting point for the whole class and then give strong students extension activities and weak students more support. Some teachers may prefer this strategy rather than grading tasks because teachers don't need a lot of preparation time and students won't feel be labeled. Take four language skills for example:

- Reading: Ask early finishers to write down a summary of the text or look up words in the text that they don't know. We can give weak students the option of only reading part of the text.
- Writing: Have strong students correct each other's writings while giving weaker students examples of writing before they start writing.
- Listening: Have strong students write down what they have heard while giving weak students scripts when it's the second time of listening.
- Speaking: Have strong students record themselves or have them pay more attention to their intonation and accents while giving weaker students more time and allow them to take note before asking them to speak.

Strategy 4: Cooperative Learning

According to research (Roger T. and David W. Johnson, 2009), cooperative learning can make students' learning more effective, especially in multilevel classes. In a cooperative learning method, students in heterogeneous groups are given equal opportunities to work together and to make their own contributions. Each of them take responsibility for different sections of a lesson. The following are some ideas for using cooperative learning:

1. Think-Pair-Share:

Think-Pair-Share is a common used strategy in cooperative learning. The procedures are as follows:

- (1) Teachers raise a question or a problem to the entire class.
- (2) Give students appropriate think time and have students come up with their own ideas or answers individually.

(3) Then students are paired with a classmate and share their thinking with each other.

(4) Teachers have a few students share their ideas with the rest of the class.

The benefits of this strategy is that each student can have enough time and enough chance to actively think about the answers to the questions before the questions are quickly answered by strong students. Also students will have the opportunity to think aloud with their partners before they are asked to share their ideas in front of everybody and they can learn from each other rather than just from teachers' answers. Ideas you can use in this strategy are as the follows:

- Brainstorm as much vocabulary that relates to a topic as they can
- What do you know about?
- What have you learned today?
- Vocabulary review
- Prediction before story telling
- Brainstorm as many compound words as you can
- Note check / Reading check
- List as many short "a" words as you can (see picture 1-3)



Picture 1: Think

Picture 2: Pair

Picture 3: Share

2. Jigsaw method:

Just as in a jigsaw puzzle, each piece, that is each student's part, is essential for final result. In a jigsaw activity in which students are organized into home groups and then are reorganized into expert groups containing one member from each home group. Students of the expert groups work together to learn or to solve problems and then return to their home groups to share their learning. You can either have a listening jigsaw activity or a reading jigsaw activity. The following is an example of how I adopt a family match worksheet from British Council and then adapt it into a listening and reading jigsaw activity.

Family match

Read four descriptions of different families. Can you match the descriptions with the right pictures?





<p>1 My family is quite big. I've got two brothers and one sister. My brother Euan is older than me. He's 14. My other brother Dan is younger than me. He's 8. My sister is younger than me too. She's called Stella and she's 5. We live with our mum and dad and our grandma. My grandma is 66.</p>	<p>2 I live with my mum and dad. I've got an older brother – he's called Malik - but he is at university and he doesn't live with us now. My aunt and uncle live near us and we visit them a lot. I've got three cousins. I play with my cousins after school and at the weekends. We have great fun!</p>	<p>3 I live with my mum, and we do lots of things together. Some weekends I stay with my dad and my stepmum, Lisa. Lisa has got a son – he's my stepbrother. He's younger than me. Jane and my dad have had a new baby so I've got a new baby brother. I love playing with him!</p>	<p>4 Hi, I'm Calice. I live with my mum and my twin sisters. They're only six years old but they're very noisy. I've got three grandparents. One grandmother lives in our street and she visits us all the time. My other grandparents visit us in the holidays.</p>
<p>A</p> 	<p>B</p> 	<p>C</p> 	<p>D</p> 

Table 2: The original worksheet, from British Council, contributed by Sue Clarke http://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/sites/kids/files/attachment/family-match-activity_0.pdf

- (1) Tell students what kind of problems they are going to work together in a group.
- (2) Assign students to home groups of 4 in a heterogeneous way.

(3) Tell students that there are four different texts here where each of them corresponds to a certain picture. Each student from the home group is going to choose and be responsible for one text to help their team find the final correct family match. The four different tasks are filling in the blank, filling in the blank with hints, anagrams and circling the right answers. Each student from the home groups has to listen carefully and finish the tasks when teachers read the texts.



Picture 4: Students chose their own tasks in a home group

Text 1: My _____ is quite big. I've got two _____ and one _____. My _____ Euan is older than me. He's 14. My other _____, Dan is younger than me. He's _____. My _____ is younger than me, too. She's called Stella and she's _____. We live with our _____ and _____ and our _____. My _____ is 66.

Text 2: I live with my m_____ and d_____. I've got an _____er _____er – he's called Malik – but he is at university and he doesn't live with us now. My a_____ and u_____ live near us and we visit them a lot. I've got three cousins. I play with my

c_____s after school and at the weekends. We have g_____ fun!

Text 3: I live with my _____ (umm), and we do lots of things together. Some weekends I stay with my _____ (add) and my _____(petsumm), Lisa. Lisa has got a _____(ons) – he’s my _____(restebproth). He’s younger than me. Jane and my dad have had a new baby so I’ve got a new baby _____(robhert). I love playing with him!

Text 4: Hi, I’m Calice. I (live / like) with my (mum / dad) and my (twin / two) sisters. They’re only (six / ten) years old but they’re very (noisy / busy). I’ve got three (grandparents / grandpas). One grandmother lives in our street and she visits us all the time. My other grandparents visit us in the (holidays / Halloween).

(4) Have students move to expert groups where everyone in the group has the same task.

Students discuss what they have heard and exchange information.



Picture 5: Students worked in an expert group

(5) Then have students go back to their home group and everyone makes their own contribution to find the correct family match.

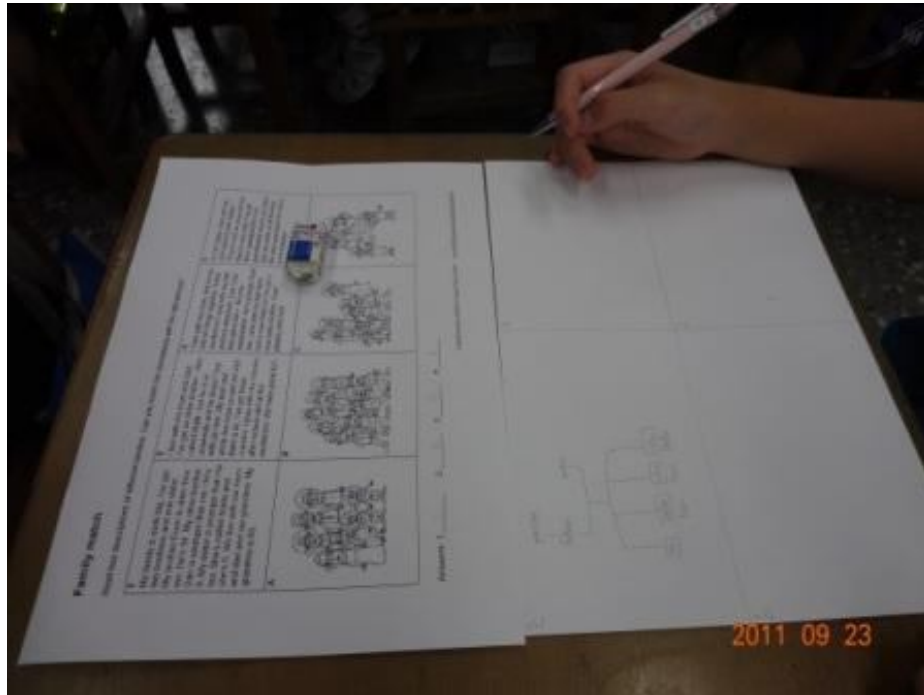


Picture 6: Students tried to find the correct family match 1

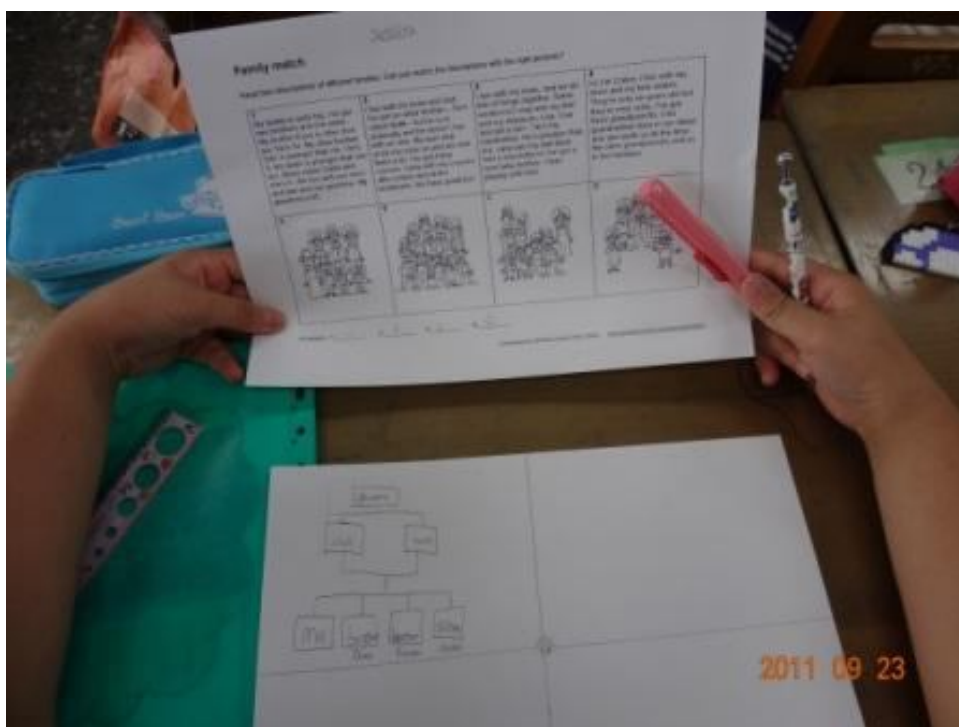


Picture 7: Students tried to find the correct family match 2

After each home group found the correct answers, I read the four texts again and make sure they all understand each text. Then I have students try to draw a family tree of each picture.



Picture 8: Students drew a family tree 1



Picture 9: Students drew a family tree 2

3. Numbered Heads Together:

Students are organized into groups and every student in each group is given a number. (e.g. from one to five in each group) The teacher raises a question to the whole class and students in each group “put their heads together” to work out the answers to the question. Then the teacher calls a specific number to answer the question. This strategy makes sure that every student knows the answers by working in a group and every student should be prepared anytime because no one knows which number will be called.

There are still some recommended ideas for cooperative learning, like learning centers, literature circle, buddy reading etc. that teachers can apply in class. Here I would like to emphasize that cooperative learning works well when it is a part of the culture of a classroom. Compare to competitive or individual learning, cooperative learning makes every student learn actively and efficiently. More than one student works together to figure out answers and at the same time they have to take their own responsibility. Peer-tutoring can help students learn best and retain more knowledge when they teach another peer. Also another important point is that when using cooperative learning in class, it's important to create a positive classroom atmosphere. Support and help from peers is crucial otherwise they cannot work together well to solve a problem.

In addition to the above strategies, you can also create a self-access center where students can decide what they want to learn in their free time and where they can make use of cassettes, videos or books to improve their language.

Finally, there is still one thing that teachers should notice when teaching mixed ability

classes. That is grouping. Teachers should notice when is the best time to have individual work, pair work, group work, or whole class work. In a controlled activity, you can have the strong with the weak while in a freer activity, maybe the strong with the strong will work better.

Conclusion

It's common that in most of EFL primary school classrooms, some learners learn English well beyond current grade-level expectations, some still struggle with English, and maybe another portion of the class falls somewhere in between. Teachers need to know their students well and find ways to involve all the students either by grading tasks, giving extension activities or using cooperative learning. For me, I would suggest cooperative learning because it creates a win-win situation for both advanced and lower level students. The advanced level students can act as a bridge to help lower level students and through that process both can facilitate each other's learning.

References

1. Roger T. and David W. Johnson. (2009). An overview of cooperative learning. Brookes Press.
2. Julie Tice. (1997). The mixed ability class. Richmond Publishing.