

TEACHING A MIXED ABILITY CLASS

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An article especially written for this site, arising from action research into mixed ability teaching carried out in Susan's MFL classes as part of the requirements for Chartered Teacher status in Scotland.

“All children are born with potential and we cannot be sure of the learning limits of any child”

(Robert Fisher, 2001, p.1).

As schools prepare to introduce a Curriculum for Excellence by August 2008 attention has once more turned to the long-standing debate on whether setting pupils in the junior secondary or leaving them in mixed ability classes is the best way to achieve effective teaching and learning.

Those in favour of setting stress the improvement in pupil achievement whereas those in favour of mixed ability groupings emphasise the importance of the social consequences. A Curriculum for Excellence offers a real challenge as it brings attainment and citizenship together as “at its heart lies the aspiration that all children and young people should be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors” (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.1).

How can teachers raise attainment while helping pupils to be responsible citizens and effective learners? Grouping pupils according to their ability would seem a logical way to allow all pupils to achieve their potential. However it makes very transparent the differences in the academic ability of pupils and is therefore not a very inclusive approach. Setting can lead to stigmatisation, low self-esteem and disruptive behaviour in pupils in lower sets. A mixed ability class allows for more of a social mix but relies heavily on the expertise of the teacher in helping a wide range of pupils achieve their potential. There is the danger that the more able might not be stretched enough while the less able are neglected. The aim of this article is to suggest strategies for teaching mixed ability classes within the framework for a Curriculum for Excellence.

Definition of a mixed ability class

It is important to make a clear distinction between mixed ability teaching and mixed ability classes. Most teachers have to teach mixed ability groups but they may not be using mixed ability teaching strategies. McKeown (2004) believes that many teachers see a mixed ability class as consisting of a group of average and able children with a subset of children who have learning problems.

Ireson & Hallam (2001) suggest teachers need to recognise that a class is mixed ability because children have different strengths and weaknesses and develop at different rates. They have different preferences for learning and displaying their work. A mixed ability class does not just consist of a range of abilities but also a range of learning styles and preferences. All pupils will show strengths at different times depending on the topic being studied and the learning style being used. When pupils are working outwith their preferred learning style then they will not perform as well. All classes even those that have been set are mixed ability to a certain degree. Therefore the following strategies are valid for all classes.

Mixed Ability Teaching

Harris and Snow (2004) express their concern that the drive to raise achievement may have left Modern Languages teachers feeling they should be drawing yet more colourful flashcards or making up differentiated worksheets. They suggest that an alternative approach would be to focus on helping pupils to become more effective learners. They recommend giving pupils more ownership not only in the choice of content but also how they go about learning. This is in keeping with the findings of the HM Inspectors of Education (HMIE).

In February 2007 HMIE produced a publication entitled “Modern Languages – A Portrait of Current Practice in Scottish Schools”. It outlined good and bad practices within the 16 secondary schools visited by inspectors. Lessons that were considered to be poor were too teacher-led with interactions only through the teacher. In these classes teachers did not explain the purpose of activities to learners, relied too heavily on the textbook and there was no choice of activities. There was not enough collaboration in groups and insufficient differentiated tasks on offer. The report also gave examples of schools doing good work within the framework of a Curriculum for Excellence. In these schools teachers used a variety of teaching methods and shared the purposes of lessons and activities with learners. Pupils were given interesting and challenging tasks to complete co-operatively in groups.

A mixed ability class can only be effectively taught if the teacher accepts that every lesson cannot be whole class teaching with lessons controlled from the front. Teaching a mixed ability class will work if all pupils are allowed to experience success and to learn as individuals. This is less likely to happen if teachers insist on whole class teaching and teaching to the average child. It is unrealistic to expect any group of pupils whatever the ability to work through a body of work at exactly the same pace. Two thirds of pupils will be working out of their learning style unless the type of task is varied.

Fisher (2001) suggests that many children don't achieve their potential because they are told “to make a journey but they have no map” (p.1). Children cannot overcome blocks to learning if they have not learnt how to learn. Teachers should act as role models for learning and teach pupils how to become independent and effective learners. Pupils need to be taught learning techniques and how to be resourceful. Pupils will be more motivated if they understand the aim of a lesson and have some input.

The teacher should be prepared to reflect on classroom practice, to adopt a problem-solving approach to any difficulties identified and experiment with a range of approaches. Teachers need to accept their new role first of all as a learner themselves and a facilitator of learning. "A secure teacher comes away from today with important questions to puzzle about overnight and the belief that today contains the insights necessary for a more effective tomorrow" (Tomlinson, 1999, p.28). The emphasis is not on what teachers teach but on what pupils learn.

Researchers (Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Harlen & Malcolm, 1997) are now suggesting that the key to success is not how pupils are grouped but the attitude and skills of the teacher in the classroom. So how can teachers become facilitators of learning and help pupils to become more effective learners?

Teaching pupils to be effective learners

Setting goals

It is important to share the goal of each lesson with pupils. This could be written on the board beside the date e.g. I know 5 words for furniture in French or I have a good understanding of present tense endings. It lets pupils know why they are there and what they are working towards. It is a good idea to remind pupils about their goal during the lesson so that they can take note of their progress. At the end of the lesson pupils should be asked to check if they have achieved this goal. Pupils could test each other then the teacher could ask for thumbs up from all the pupils who feel they have achieved something in the lesson.

Teaching pupils to think for themselves

It is important that when learning new vocabulary pupils are allowed to work out the meanings themselves. I write the French words on the board and encourage the pupils to work out the meanings using their knowledge of English and their prior knowledge of the foreign language. When we are left with the words that are nothing like English we make up a story to help us remember the words e.g. la commode. Commando officers in the army have big chests hence chest of drawers. Pupils love the opportunity to be creative and come up with some wonderful stories: some examples

Le pont = think of a bridge over the pond

L'armoire = you put your Armani clothes in the wardrobe

L'usine = imagine the smoke oozing out of the factory

Il neige rhymes with sledge which you take out when it is snowing

Pupils need to be taught how to learn vocabulary. They do not learn simply by copying down the words. Getting pupils to work out the meanings keeps them focused and I find that their retention of words is much better. I spend time teaching pupils how to learn the words. We go through the processes in class that they should be doing at home to learn new words. I read out the French word with the English meaning and the pupils repeat

after me. They then sit in silence covering up the English meanings and test themselves. After that they test each other in pairs or for variety one half of the class tests the other half, one pupil at a time.

When reinforcing the vocabulary I make sure I provide something for all the three main learning styles. I always use flashcards and sometimes pupils get their own small cards to play with. When it is appropriate I get the pupils to do an action with the new word or phrase e.g. hobbies, daily routine, weather etc. Sometimes I give pupils 5 minutes to learn the words in their own preferred style. Some pupils draw a picture and write the words underneath. Others work in pairs and one pupil says the word while the other does a mime. Some pupils just like to hear the word and say the English meaning.

Another way of helping pupils to take responsibility for their learning is to get the pupils to decide on the vocabulary to be learnt. This can take the form of a brainstorming session on the board or pupils in groups looking up the dictionary. When teaching the topic of food in S2 I put pupils into groups and get them to look up 10-15 French words for food and drink and make a poster. It is a popular task with pupils and practices dictionary skills.

Teaching pupils to be resourceful

Another part of teaching pupils to be effective learners is to teach them what resources are available to them. It is important that pupils are trained to keep their vocabulary jotters tidy with headings and an index page. They need to know where to find the meaning of a word if they are stuck; whether via the vocabulary jotter, word lists in the text book or a dictionary. Pupils should be taught early on in S1 how to use a dictionary. If a pupil says they he/she does not know the meaning of a word then the teacher should remind the pupil of the resources available.

Teaching pupils to be organised

I have the date and a warm-up exercise on the board at the start of every class. This allows those pupils who are keen to learn to get started instead of waiting for the late-comers. The warm-up is always revision of the previous days work and allows pupils the chance to review how much they have retained.

Teaching pupils learning strategies

In listening activities I encourage pupils to try and repeat in their head any word they can't remember the meaning of or to try and write it down to see if the written format looks familiar. As a class we practice looking at the questions while listening to the text and also reading the questions then looking away and just listening and making a few notes.

I also teach the pupils Reading techniques. They learn how to recognise nouns, verbs and adjectives in a sentence so that they can divide texts up and make more sense of the

words. We practice identifying cognates and making intelligent guesses at meanings of words based on the context.

Teaching pupils about pacing

I encourage pupils to keep an eye on the clock while they are working and to pace themselves. I regularly let them know what time they have left and suggest what a reasonable amount of work is. Pupils also like to know how much work needs to be done. It might not always be realistic for pupils to complete a whole sheet. I put a grid on the board with exercises that **MUST** be completed in class and **GOOD** indicates the exercises that the more able pupils should aim for. If I forget the pupils always remind me.

Meeting the Individual Needs of Pupils

Using variety to cover the different learning styles

My action research project showed that pupils' preferences cover all four skills: listening, reading, writing and listening. Each skill received a similar number of votes. It was the same for the skill they liked the least. Almost the same number of pupils liked speaking and disliked speaking. This goes to show that pupils vary so much in their likes and dislikes. It will never be possible for a teacher to please pupils all the time. However there are strategies that the teacher can use. It is important to use variety in the lesson plans. I try to incorporate a task using each of the skills in every lesson, certainly never less than 3 of them.

Differentiation

“Children already come to us differentiated. It just makes sense that we would differentiate our instruction in response to them. (Tomlinson, 1999, p.24).

Basic Differentiation

Differentiation at its most basic level is pupils working with or without the help of their vocabulary jotter. I constantly remind pupils that if they complete the exercises without the help of the vocabulary jotter then they are working at a higher level and will learn more. By the end of the lesson all pupils should have closed their vocabulary jotter.

Catering for the different learning styles

Visual learners process information most effectively when they can see what they are learning e.g. through reading, writing and observing. Auditory learners need to hear information to help them learn e.g. via oral presentations. Kinesthetic learners learn best when they can manipulate objects e.g. by doing, touching and moving (Nordlund, 2003). Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences suggests that pupils need to show their knowledge in different ways e.g. via pictures, talking or acting.

The easiest way to do this is to take a reading exercise from the Métro book and to allow pupils to respond in different ways to the texts. Here is an example using the reading exercise on p62. For the Benjamin speech bubble pupils could make up English questions for their partner to answer. Pupils have to show their understanding of the Sophie speech bubble by drawing a picture. For the Samuel speech bubble pupils could act out his hobbies to show understanding. The final speech bubble could be translated into English so that pupils get the chance to translate carefully e.g. time phrases.

Offer a menu of activities

Another strategy I have used is to offer pupils a menu of activities using the different skills and let them choose their activity. A weather forecast can be turned into a listening, reading, speaking or writing activity. This might seem time-consuming but if colleagues work together and share the workload then it is an effective way to teach a mixed ability class. It also frees the teacher up to wander round the class and act as a facilitator.

Open and creative tasks

Pupils could be given an open and creative task which allows them to work at their own level. In Métro bleu in module 3 I give pupils the task of setting up a French school. They have to decide on a name for the school. The tasks involve making up a dream timetable, a mini school handbook (e.g. name of school, times, clubs etc) the design of a school uniform and a play outlining activities at school. I usually put pupils into ability groups and give them a week to complete the tasks.

Higher level thinking skills

Another way of differentiating work is to take a text from Metro bleu and use Blooms taxonomy to make up more challenging questions for the more able. Bloom describes six levels of thinking: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation and synthesis. More able pupils often need less time developing the basic facts at the knowledge and comprehension levels. Here is an example from p80. Instead of just getting pupils to list what furniture is in each room pose a more challenging question e.g. Which bedroom would you most like to have? Give reasons for your answer. p91 – Which family seems closest to your own? p74 which of the properties would you choose to buy?

Tiered activities

In any class there will be times when some pupils have mastered a point while others need reinforcement. This is where using tiered activities can be effective. Again on the topic of food with a S2 class I identified suitable exit points to introduce flexible group work. Some pupils needed more reinforcement of the vocabulary on food while others I felt were ready to tackle grammar points. I spent 10 minutes explaining the rule about using the partitive article when talking about food in French. One group was given a

vocabulary reinforcement sheet. Two groups were given the grammar sheet but with multiple choice answers so as to provide some support. The two most able groups were given a closed text with no support.

I also tried out a tiered writing task. Pupils were to create a puzzle on food for a parallel class to complete. The bronze level was to design a word search, the silver level was to be an odd-one-out exercise and the gold level was to be clues in French e.g. C'est un fruit jaune.

Co-operative group work

Co-operative group work allows pupils to work within their preferred learning style while developing their social skills. I gave my S2 classes a collaborative project involving three tasks on the topic of "café" covering the three main learning styles. They had to decide on a name for the café, design a menu, record a radio advert announcing special offers and write the script of a play which all group members were to participate in. Every pupil was to be given a task to complete. All the different tasks were to be brought together at the end of the project and pieced together like a jigsaw. The radio advert would be played announcing the café, then the café scene would be acted out using the menu card that had been designed.

I spent some time explaining to pupils the importance of every pupil having a role to play and that each pupil had a responsibility to the group to complete the task on time so that the final product could be produced. I discussed the various tasks with the pupils and what skills might be needed. I then got the pupils to talk about their strengths and interests with each other and to divide up the tasks.

Conclusions

The biggest stumbling block to effective mixed ability teaching would seem to be teacher attitude. Teachers lack the knowledge of strategies to use in the classroom to cater for a wide range of ability. Setting reduces the range of ability in the class but does not remove the fact that all pupils have individual needs and learning preferences. More staff training is needed to inform teachers about catering for the different learning styles, using Bloom's taxonomy to provide challenging differentiated work and the social and academic benefits of using collaborative group work. Teachers also need to be trained to be facilitators of learning so that whole class teaching does not predominate in most lessons. Pupils need to be taught how to take responsibility for their own learning. If these strategies are followed then the four competences for a Curriculum for Excellence can be met. I would recommend starting with one class and introducing a few strategies at a time.

Strategies for teaching a mixed ability class

- Get to know the pupils names and if possible one fact about them e.g. their hobby.
- Make pupils aware about the different learning styles. Teach pupils techniques for learning new work that cover the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic modes of learning.
- Make sure that pupils are aware of the aim of each lesson and what they are expected to achieve by the end of the lesson.
- Teach pupils how to be resourceful so that they know where to find help if they get stuck. They should not be reliant on the teacher.
- Try to involve pupils in the learning process. Perhaps allow pupils to choose the order topics are studied in.
- Vary presentation techniques to cater for visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners.
- Vary classroom management. Allow pupils to work individually, in pairs and in groups.
- At times provide a menu of work on the board offering tiered activities. Allow pupils to choose their level of work.
- Allow pupils to show their understanding in different ways i.e. a visual representation, an oral presentation or physical demonstration.
- Make use of higher order thinking skills using Blooms taxonomy. Pupils should not just be given comprehension tasks to complete. Pupils need to be given problem-solving tasks and the opportunity to transfer their knowledge to a new context.
- Make use of flexible groups at suitable exit points in the course to allow for reinforcement and extension.
- Make use of within class ability groups and set pupils creative tasks to do.
- Use co-operative group work to allow pupils to develop social skills as well as other skills such as negotiation and time management.

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