MIXED ABILITY CLASSES: PROBLEMS, STRATEGIES AND PRACTICAL HELP

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RESUMO
Este artigo enfoca alguns problemas que os professores enfrentam ao lidar com classes heterogêneas bem como as estratégias e/ou técnicas para solucioná-los. Sabemos que os alunos são diferentes uns dos outros e isso nos remete à maneira pela qual eles aprendem ou a maneira através da qual eles precisam ser ensinados. Baseados na teoria de Ur (2005), Scrivener (2005), Harmer (1998) e Bowler e Parminter (2002), discorremos sobre esse assunto e apresentamos três atividades que engajam os alunos de classes heterogêneas de maneira mais eficaz no processo ensino-aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: classes heterogêneas; alunos; professores; atividades.

ABSTRACT
This paper focus on some problems teachers face when dealing with mixed-ability/heterogeneous classes as well as on strategies and/or techniques to overcome these problems. We know that learners are different from one another which affects how they learn and need to be taught. Based on the theory of the authors, such as Ur (2005),
Scrivener (2005), Harmer (1998) and Bowler and Parminter (2002), we will talk about these classes and present three activities which engage mixed-ability/heterogeneous students in the teaching-learning process in a more effective way.

**Keywords**: mixed-ability/heterogeneous classes; learners; teachers/activities.
INTRODUCTION

Many teachers see mixed-ability classes as a delicate situation. However, they can be seen through a more positive perspective. To begin with, we, teachers, have to be aware of the fact that the term mixed-ability does not cover all the aspects involved in these kinds of classes. Heterogeneous classes would be a more appropriate term, as we will see throughout this paper.

Teachers should be aware of the varied needs of students so that they can provide a number of teaching approaches that will fulfill these needs in a way that activities are suitably challenged. The aim of this paper is to give guidelines for teachers to face the problems mixed-ability/heterogeneous classes may pose and also strategies to deal with them. Moreover, some practical help will be given.

MIXED-ABILITY/ HETEROGENEOUS CLASSES

Learner populations vary according to a range of characteristics such as the ones suggested by Ur (2005): beginner, intermediate or advanced learners; young children, teenagers or adult learners; learners’ goal in learning the target language; how motivated learners are; the use of the target language outside the classroom; how heterogeneous or homogeneous the class is and how big the groups are. According to Ur (2005), the most problematical characteristics are:

- **learner motivation**: teachers have the responsibility not only to provide opportunities for learning but also to motivate students since motivation is strongly related to achievement in learning the target language;

- **young and adult learners**: teachers should be aware of differences in learning styles, abilities and motivation between age groups as they necessarily involve different selection of material, methodology and choices in lesson planning;
• **heterogeneous classes**: teachers should be aware of the fact that learners are different from one another in a number of ways, which affect their learning styles and consequently the way teachers should teach them.

*Heterogeneous classes*, which are also called *mixed-ability classes*, is the aim of this article, focusing particularly on problems teachers face and on strategies and/or techniques to overcome these problems. Ur (2005, p. 273) expresses her preference in using the term *heterogeneous* rather than *mixed-ability classes*:

The term ‘mixed-ability’, however, implies that the important difference between members of a mixed class is in their language-learning ability, but this is not necessarily so. Even if the main observed difference between them is in the amount of language they know, this may have its roots in all sorts of other reasons besides ability (previous teaching, motivation, etc.). And there are plenty of other differences between learners that need to be taken into account by a teacher: preferred learning style, personality, interests, cultural background – to name only a few. Thus the term ‘heterogeneous’ – composed of different kinds of people – is I think more suitable in defining such classes.

As we can see the term *mixed ability* is misleading since what most teachers understand by it is a class of learners in which the most important difference among them is their level of performance in the target language.

Scrivener (2005, p. 68) gives more details about it when he says that “[…] calling a class ‘Pre-Intermediate’ can make sense – it’s a useful general classification that gives a reasonable overall picture of what they might know and what they might be able to do”. This classification is helpful to a certain extent, as Scrivener (2005) points out: it will suggest material teachers can use and activities they can plan, however, as the term involves not only learners’ ability to per-
form but also potential learning ability teachers will see that some of these students are ‘weak Pre-Intermediate’, others are ‘mid Pre-Intermediate’ and some are ‘strong Pre-Intermediate students’.

Having students at a certain named level might “mask the fact that she (a learner)\(^1\) has a range of levels over the different language systems and skills, e.g. perhaps her knowledge of grammar is very good, her vocabulary a little weaker and her speaking and listening are very much poorer” (SCRIVENER, 2005, p. 68). Another aspect that is worth mentioning is the fact that heterogeneous classes are, sometimes, compounded if they are also large classes.

In heterogeneous classes the following learners’ differences mentioned by Ur (2005) are usually emphasised:

- language-learning ability;
- language knowledge;
- cultural background;
- learning style;
- mother language;
- intelligence.

All these differences pose various teaching problems. Ur (2005) considers some as the most significant in heterogeneous classes:

- difficulty to control discipline;
- difficulty to be certain that all students are learning effectively;
- difficulty to find appropriate material;
- difficulty to follow individual progress in large classes;

\(^1\) Word added by the author of this article.
• difficulty to activate all learners’ participation.

Ur (2005) also suggests a variety of procedures teachers can adopt to overcome the problems above which emerge in heterogeneous classes:

• to deal with discipline problems, teachers can vary tasks and materials making the lesson more interesting since discipline problems can be associated with boredom and lack of challenge;

• for all students effective learning, teachers can individualise activities, thus students learn at their own pace and occasionally they choose their own tasks; teachers can encourage compulsory plus optional instructions in which students have to do a minimal part of the task and the rest they do if they want to, have time or wish to do; teachers can also encourage open-ended cues, in which students do not have predetermined right answers, there are a number of acceptable responses;

• to find suitable material teachers have to adapt and/or supplement coursebooks to add variation, to include elements of choice and individualization and to get more participation which are important characteristics in heterogeneous classes;

• to follow all students’ progress teachers should work with personalisation and individualisation or monitoring pairs and groups by listening to them and giving feedback later on;

• to activate participation teachers should engage students in the tasks by increasing collaborative and individual work using open-ended cues.

If the procedure is the ‘compulsory plus optional tasks’, Ur (2005, p. 307) comments on the importance of clear instructions: “Typically,
instructions that introduce ‘compulsory + optional’ work include phrases like ‘do at least’, ‘if you have time’, ‘do as much as you can of …’.

Working in groups or in pairs is one of the suggestions to complete a task in heterogeneous classes. However, some groups might finish before others. Thus in order to let some students who have not finished the task, finish it, and to avoid boredom from those who have already carried out the task, teachers should provide the latter with a spare activity or an extension of the original task as Harmer (1998, p. 127) states: “do different tasks with the same material”.

Another important suggestion to help deal with the problems in heterogeneous classes is the one made by Nunan (1998, p. 30) “[...] accommodating learning style and strategy preferences in the classroom can result in improved learner satisfaction and attainment”.

Learning styles refer to students’ favourite way of learning. Learning strategies refer to the mental process learners apply to learn and use the target language. Although most students do not have a choice in what to learn since we, teachers, usually follow the syllabus, they do have a choice in how to learn. In order to help them to be more aware of and flexible in their approaches to learning, teachers should expose students to a number of different ways of learning the target language to help them choose the one which applies to them best.

Although heterogeneous classes are most of the time seen as problematical ones, they also have their advantages, and some of them can also be used to solve problems according to Ur (2005).

  • students knowledge, varied opinion, interests and ideas can be used in classroom interaction;
  • students increase their knowledge and awareness of others in heterogeneous classes;
• there is much more peer-teaching and collaboration among students since teachers are less able to attend every individual student;
• classes are more challenging and interesting for teachers and students.

PRACTICAL HELP

Three practical activities will be presented below based on the suggestions made by the writers mentioned throughout this paper. The activities can be adapted to any teaching situation.

Tiered Tasks

The purpose of this activity – see tasks below – is to check the comprehension of the passage *The Spirit of London* exhibit at Madame Tussaud’s wax museum in London. Bowler and Parminter (2002) call the activity *tiered tasks* because they compare the tasks to tiers of a wedding cake. The top tier of the wedding cake is the smallest part of it, which gives little room for mistakes and the most support as the other layers are considered the supporting pillars. Thus this is a good task for weaker students. On the other hand, the bottom tier is the biggest part of the wedding cake, which gives students freedom to run risks, hence the least support – there are no pillars. For this reason, this is a good task for stronger students. The activity presents students with a choice of their own task and after having worked with it for some time, students begin to choose realistic tasks for their level – a task that they can cope with and is not boring – if they have not done it since the first day they were given the chance to choose the task.

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2This activity is suggested by Bowler; Parminter (2002, p. 60-61) and is presented here in the same way they did
• Task A gives all the answers on the page for support. They are jumbled for challenge. Weaker students manipulate the given material, and can use logic to help match the task items, together with the information in the reading text.

• Task B gives multiple-choice answers to help the average students. This is slightly different from the conventional “one answer only is correct” multiple choice, since in questions 3 and 4 there is more than one correct answer.

• Task C gives open questions – with no extra support – to challenge the strongest students in the group (BOWLER; PARMINTER, 2002, p. 60-61).

**Procedures:** Students choose which task they want to do, without seeing the choices, according to the amount of help they want: a lot of help, some help, or no help. Then the teacher hands out the task and gives feedback as soon as students have completed them. The teacher cannot type the students’ level, as it was done below, in order not to undermine their confidence.

**Top Tier**

**Task A: Weaker students**

1. How much of London’s history does *The Spirit of London* show?
2. How do you go around it?
3. What special effects does it have?
4. What can you see in the modern-day section?

**Answers**

a. lights, sound, music, and smells
b. police, punks, and tourists

c. more than 400 years

d. in a taxi

**Middle Tier**

**Task B: Midlevel students**

1. How much of London’s history does *The Spirit of London* show?
   a. 400 years
   b. more than 400 years
   c. 399 years

2. How do you go around it?
   a. in a taxi
   b. in a train
   c. on foot

3. What special effects does it have?
   a. lights
   b. sound and music
   c. smells

4. What can you see in the modern-day section?
   a. police
   b. punks
   c. tourists
Bottom Tier

Task C: Stronger students

1. How much of London’s history does *The Spirit of London* show?
2. How do you go around it?
3. What special effects does it have?
4. What can you see in the modern-day section?

*Source: Bowler e Parminter (2002, p. 60-61).*

A reading passage: questions

The purpose of this activity – see procedures, text and questions below – is to discuss environmental problems, to introduce some lexical items in context and have a more heterogeneous activity. The flexibility of the exercise may affect heterogeneous classes positively in a number of ways: the possibility of answering a fewer number of questions from the total in the task might give students a greater sense of achievement. As weak students are not normally able to finish the tasks, they will not feel they are holding up the group and they will not feel they have not achieved much since they will be able to complete it; the possibility of choosing which questions to answer allows them to finish the task since they chose the questions they can cope with and leave out the ones which require more elaborated answers.

Stronger students will not feel they are being delayed as they have an extension of the task, which will keep them busy all through the time set. As a result, the teacher will be able to keep to timing set and will have a better control of the activity.

‘Compulsory + optional’ tasks, as mentioned previously by
Ur (2005), provide all learners with a sense of achievement, which is essential in the teaching-learning process.

**Procedures:** as a warm-up activity, students carry out a group discussion about the environment today based on the questions in exercise 1 below. The teacher can ask the questions orally, one at a time, giving students a time limit to talk about them in their groups or he/she can write the questions on the board. As soon as the discussion is over, the teacher asks students to report to the whole class so that feedback can be given. After the discussion the teacher hands out the text with a set of six questions (exercise A below) and asks students to choose four questions to be answered within a time set. The teacher also tells them that they can answer the other questions if they want to or have enough time. Feedback will be given later on.

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The source of the text is unknown to the author, therefore, it was not provided.

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1. Our changing environment

1.1 The environment today

Discuss these questions with your class.

- How is the environment changing?
- How is it different from the environment of 50 years ago?
- What problems are there in the environment today, do you think?
- Are there environmental problems where you live?
- What are people doing to help the environment?
Problems for the environment
The Earth is 4.600 million years old. Modern man has lived on the Earth for only 55,000 years but, in that time, we have changed our planet in many ways. Many of the things that we have done are good, but many, many more are not good for the Earth.

Traffic pollution In big cities, cars and buses have polluted the air. Many people in cities now have very bad health problems. Factory pollution Factories have also polluted the land and the water. As a result, many rivers and lakes are now dead.

The ozone layer Around the Earth, there is a special type of oxygen called ozone (O_3). Ozone is important because it stops ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Many aerosol sprays and factories destroy ozone and they have made a very big hole in the ozone layer. This means that too much ultraviolet radiation now enters Earth. This is very dangerous because it can cause cancer.

More carbon dioxide Carbon dioxide (CO_2) in the air has increased a lot. CO_2 comes from burning oil, coal and wood. This has formed a ‘blanket’ around the Earth. The heat from the sun cannot escape and so the temperature is rising (the ‘greenhouse effect’). This means that the level of the sea is rising and the climate is changing.

Fewer trees All over the world, people have cut down millions and millions of trees. As a result, many types of animals and plants are now disappearing. Trees are also important because the help to produce oxygen and control the climate.

Check your understanding
Are these sentences true or false?

1. The Earth is 35,000 years old.
2. Ozone protects us from the sun.
3. The temperature of the Earth is rising.

Write your answers to these questions.

1. Why are trees important?
2. What is ozone?
3. What is ‘the greenhouse effect’?

Check your answers with your teacher. Then write some true/false sentences and some questions for other students.
Collaborative composition

The purpose of this activity is to work with the *past simple* and the *past perfect simple* as a remedial exercise – see procedures below. It is worthwhile carrying out a collaborative composition in class since all the students have the opportunity to contribute and weak students are not exposed to their mistakes during the correction phase. As
nobody knows who has written each specific sentence, weak students do not run the risk of losing face while mistakes are corrected later on by the teachers, during the feedback phase. Besides, they are exposed to good language.

It is believed that students’ contribution to write the composition and to help in the correction generate interest in the activity, which also foster language learning.

**Procedures:** each student gets a sheet of paper and writes a single sentence about their last weekend. They then pass it on to the person on their right. After reading the previous sentence the person on the right adds another sentence to the passage. The activity ends when students have their own sheet of paper in their hands again. Then, one student reads aloud one composition and the teacher works on language focusing on the correct use and form of verb tenses – as it was the writing purpose – as a full-class activity. The teacher should take the other compositions home to provide feedback and consequently check individual progress.

**CONCLUSION**

The theory and the activities presented in this paper confirm that it is possible to deal with heterogeneous classes successfully. Even if we face some problems or do not get it right at the beginning, it is worthwhile carrying out more heterogeneous activities to encourage all learners to activate their language knowledge.

When we plan lessons, we need to remember that we are planning something that may not be appropriate for some and may be easy or difficult for others, etc., which is why the planning is only one part of structuring a lesson. In the act of teaching, we need to constantly notice and respond to feedback in order to adjust and redirect work moment by moment to make it as effective for each individual as possible (SCRIVENER, 2005, p. 69).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


