

Edmund Dudley & Erika Osváth: Mixed-Ability Teaching

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The issued book from Oxford University Press is a 112 page long edition in Into the Classroom series, in paper boards, on B2-C1 level.

This book is an essential guide for teachers and teacher trainers with plenty of practical advice, strategies and techniques to make it possible for them to get the best out of their students. After the acknowledgement, contents and introduction the main part of the book deals with methodological and pedagogical questions in each topic within mixed ability teaching.

The book is logically organized into 8 parts and 24 units. It aims to give help for practicing teachers to prepare efficiently for lessons, regarding the factors that affect mixed-ability groups.

It offers means to activate and motivate students in mixed-ability groups; to assess in a learner-centred way and it helps to improve the learning environment.

The authors Edmund Dudley and Erika Osváth are practising teachers so the given techniques are true and usable in teaching practice.

Edmund Dudley is a freelance teacher trainer and English teacher, with experience in mixed-ability classes in secondary and primary schools.

Erika Osváth is a freelance teacher trainer and English teacher in many international settings for primary and secondary education.

Part 1: Preparing for a mixed ability class

It gives a short introduction for teachers how to prepare for a mixed ability class. We have to take into consideration many factors, such as identifying variables, setting goals and planning differentiated activities. As teachers we have to get to know our students. This chapter offers many ways to do so, for instance questionnaires, gap fills and surveys. It is important to be aware of our students personal needs, personalities and attitudes.

„A teacher’s job is not only to teach the language, it is also to help learners engage with it.”

After this introductory session the class has to set the common goals.

„It is a way of identifying strengths and areas to work on.”

When it is done and a pleasant learning environment is created, the teacher has to plan various differentiated activities. This makes it possible to include every student in the learning process. One significant aspect is to differentiate

according to language level, provide different options how it is used and finally use open questions to respond to.

All these three stages are supported with simple, useful and clear explanations and examples.

Part 2: Managing the classroom

In this section the topic of groupwork is highlighted, which is ultimate in building learner's confidence and appropriate level of participation. In order to decrease off task behaviour, we can use grab the string, coloured sticky notes, sorting activity, onion groups and autograph book techniques.

Participants are mentioned as well in this passage, as students can be timekeepers or dice masters. Teachers are responsible for involving students in the running of the classroom, facilitating learning, accomodating learners of different levels, promoting learning and appreciating the whole person of a student. On the top of all that we have to create a pleasant and positive learning environment with the possibility of self correction in specific situations.

Part 3: Making the most of L1

The chapter, titled Making ourselves understood is based on the role of L1 and the question of using it or not. This paragraph deals with sandwiching, which means our statements have to contain 3 items: 1 in English, 1 in Hungarian and 1 in English again, to make the meaning clear for everyone.

In a broad sense L1 is a tool, which saves time, effort and it eliminates anxiety.

Part 4: Working with language

In this procedure the new language has to be contextualized meaningfully, where students have to understand not only the language and the word, but the context as well. They have to grasp the meaning with the help of visual representations.

Regarding new language we have to mention the 4 basic skills. In reading and listening, the preparation stage has to be emphasized, while in case of productive skills, such speaking and writing, we have to provide weaker students help, to make them possible to produce the vital language.

Part 5: Getting better together

This chapter summarises the most significant factors of improvement: task, study skills and types of learners'. Task based learning is a key factor in supporting our students' advancement. This type of learning stresses activities which focus on communicating ideas. Tasks have a strong goal orientation, where the main point is task achievement and not language practice. To achieve the ability for this we have to raise awareness about successful study skills, and

we have to emphasize the role of metacognition. In a mixed ability group, sharing study techniques must be basic between dominant and less confident students. For the first group, we have to find new roles to rechannel their behavior, while on the other hand we have to praise and encourage less confident students.

Part 6: Collaboration, creativity and expression

If we promote collaboration and cooperation, the given tasks enable more learning, as learners have to work for a common goal. Cooperation is not equal with cheating, as some say. It has many benefits what we have to consider. It promotes responsibility and empathy. To dredge it up we can use for example project work. Here language is a tool not an end. This process could be assisted by images which are the outputs of learners' collaboration.

No matter what your language level is you will get the chance to be in front of the group with drama technique. It is suitable for students with limited language resources, because they are able to use nonverbal communication for self expression. Silent film technique is a brilliant example for introducing drama in your mixed ability class. It is a good way for controlled repetition which is a key concept in giving confidence to individual learners.

Part 7: Assessment

Assessment is a huge challenge, if we implement the above mentioned techniques. If students deal with tests in their own peace in manageable chunks teachers have to replan the lessons. The first emerging question is how is it possible nowadays? If we implement the given instructions the students' motivation will be maintained.

With the help of test box technique, students can have the chance for self correction and relearning instead of becoming undermotivated, because of their mistakes and bad marks. They will be able to improve and become engaged in learning.

„Learners need to see errors as opportunities for learning, not as evidence of failure.”

In two step test completion, teacher ticks the correct answers, leaves out the others, students self correct themselves and finally the teacher grades them. If they provide supportive feedback, it should be given in manageable chunks. If possible they should turn negative comments in constructive questions, that lead learners to solutions. Sometimes metalinguistic responses can be used to elicit self correction.

Part 8: Understanding attitudes and motivation

We should show sensitivity towards our students' attitudes and motivation and it will have positive effect on the classroom dynamic. This will result in creating

strong and positive learning morale. We should avoid negativism and focus on positive behavior. To have positive effect on our students' attitudes we have to focus on their emotions and expectations about the learning situation. Regarding success it is important to listen to social skills, values and life skills.

My point of view is that it is embarrassing to always differentiate between talented and other students. Sometimes it is better to see them as equal. After a period of time they become aware of the difference in task solving and it will have negative effects on their attitudes and personalities.

In schools with non motivated students most of these tasks are impossible to tackle with. Those kids whose SES and language level are not satisfying, will not be able to concentrate, cooperate and join the lesson properly. For these children in real life the aim is to get only a 2 and nothing else. We can implement these methods but it won't led us to our aim. In an average secondary school the common aim is to take the matura exam. As a practising secondary school teacher I am afraid I cannot use these techniques all the year round, but these are perfect tools to motivate students or to make our lessons more colorful and enjoyable.

The bearing of the book in language teaching is that it focuses on giving practical advice to language teachers, teacher trainers and future teachers, and for those who are interested in teaching and methodological questions. As I see, the book is eminently beneficial for those who are not as creative or not as enthusiastic as they could be.

If you are the one, who is searching for idea, practical help and plenty of examples in order to create pleasant atmosphere in your language lessons and to promote language development of your students in your groups, that book is for you!

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