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## TEACHING GIFTED STUDENTS BY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN A MIXED-ABILITY CLASS

*На основе анализа научно-педагогической литературы автором предложены стратегии, которыми может пользоваться учитель для обучения иностранному языку одаренных школьников в условиях разноуровневого класса.*

**Ключевые слова:** обучение одаренных школьников, обучение иностранному языку, разноуровневый класс

*Based on scientific and pedagogical literature analysis some strategies that can be used by a teacher to teach gifted students a foreign language in conditions of mixed-ability class are offered.*

**Key words:** teaching gifted students, teaching a foreign language, mixed-ability class

Actuality of the problem. Teaching gifted students is actual nowadays. However, the problem a teacher meets with is the fact that gifted and talented children usually learn not separately or individually in secondary schools, but together with other children. In other words, they study in multilevel conditions, in mix-ability classes. It is difficult to find activities that involve all the students without some getting bored and others being confused, insecure or discouraged. It is very important for foreign language teachers and is determined by the fact that this subject is taught in artificial conditions, without language curriculum, and is considered to be one of the most difficult, but interesting school subjects. It is necessary to consider these facts when we teach gifted and talented students.

A mixed ability class is a class where the students have different levels and abilities in English or any other foreign language. To a certain extent, all classes are mix-ability and you will find stronger and weaker students in every group. However many schools, due to financial reasons, find it useful to put as many students as they can in each class and often you will find students in the class who most definitely belong in another level.

There are scientific researches devoted to different aspects of teacher training how to work with gifted and talented students: how to create conditions for gifted and talented students at school (N. Zavhorodnya [2]), future teacher's training how to develop children's intellectual giftness (Yu. Klymenyuk [3]), psychological organization the interaction between teachers and gifted students (I. Lyubovetska [4]) and others, and there are also researches about teaching in mix-ability classes (T. Aikina [1], A. V. Kelly, L. Prodromou and others).

So, with mixed ability classes, there are three approaches you can take [6]:

1. Target the majority of the students. Activities and exercises are aimed at the general level of the class for most of the students. Stronger students will find these easy, weaker students will find these hard.
2. Target the extremes. Push the level up or down so that you include the stronger or weaker students. This can often mean you «lose» the majority of the students.
3. Mix the approach: target the majority of students but set extra work or more difficult work for the stronger students or easier tasks for the weaker students. This can result in those students feeling «left out» of the main class; either feeling punished or singled out due to their skill or lack of ability. This also means more work for the teacher.

Knowing students' personalities helps the teacher to prepare and adapt materials based on a meaningful context for all learners in order to make them relevant to students as individuals, which



adds variety to the classroom environment and establishes a positive atmosphere. A mixed ability class should offer all the students an appropriate challenge to help them to progress in their own terms. It is usually necessary for the educator to evaluate and adapt the materials providing activities to respond to the diverse student needs. The intent in doing so during some parts of a lesson is to make a task more achievable. Activities applying to different levels can be assigned at the beginning of a lesson, during group activities, or during individual assessment. Adapting activities to two or three different levels of linguistic difficulty enables the student to choose a more or less challenging version at which he/she can function so that they perform to their maximum potential [7].

Here are some different ideas for teaching gifted and talented students in mixed ability groups [6]:

1) Split the class: equal ability. As much as you can, divide the class into smaller groups of equal ability for different activities and then set different activities for each group. This does not mean completely different activities for each group, rather that you ask each group to come up with different results from the same activity. For example, if you are getting each group to write a short text on a particular subject, you would ask the stronger group to make it 100 words long, the majority 75 words and the weaker group 50 words.

2) Split the class: mixed ability. Each group has a stronger and/or weaker student. This can often encourage the stronger student to help the weaker student (this is known as Peer Teaching). Your knowledge of the students is important here so that the students you put together are compatible.

3) Homework. This does not always mean completely different homework for each student. You can easily adapt exercises for different levels. Suppose you have a gap-fill exercise you want to give. With stronger students you can create more gaps, with weaker students give them less gaps, for example.

The use of pair and group work is essential if you are to involve all the members of the class. A fundamental technique here is the use of questionnaires and interviews. By pairing off weaker and stronger students and involving both in the preparation and in implementation of the questionnaire, you should ensure maximum participation of all the students. You can then get the weaker students to interview the stronger ones and vice-versa. Of course, this may be frustrating for the stronger ones, but if they are able to see their role as that of «helper» or even mentor, it may also have a positive effect.

A second area of activity that can be productive in mixed ability classes is project work. Again, this can work successfully using mixed groups where the stronger help the weaker, but another approach is to form groups that are at approximately the same level and assign different tasks that are appropriate to the level of each group. By adjusting the complexity of the task, you can ensure that each group has a task that it can carry out successfully, thereby providing the correct level of challenge for the higher-level students and not demotivating the weaker ones.

A third area is that of homework. If you set the whole class the same homework task irrespective of level, then you will have to expect very mixed results. As with progress tests, the purpose of homework should be to consolidate class work. To this end, giving weaker students less demanding tasks can help both to motivate them and to give them further practice in areas of the language, which they have not yet mastered. Assigning tasks that are more challenging to the stronger students in the group should ensure that they remain motivated and continue to make progress. It is more work for the teacher but, ultimately, it should produce results.

The language teachers should be aware of the problems of teaching gifted and talented students in mixed ability classes and their solutions to identify the source of troubles in their classes and to cure them.

Deniz Şalli-Çopur singles out such general problems as: 1) Materials. Some students may find the textbook boring and very hard, whereas some find it interesting or very easy. In addition, as language teaching course materials are currently based on content-based or theme-based syllabi, some students may find the topics dull, strange, or meaningless; whereas others find it enjoyable, familiar or interesting. Therefore, it is usually necessary for the teacher to evaluate and adapt the materials according to his/her class; 2) Participation. Some of the students find it difficult to speak in the target language for many reasons ranging from interest to confidence, from age to knowledge.



Other students, however, would like to express everything they think or feel by using the new language; 3) Interests. For instance, some students may find lessons boring, as the topic has no familiarity with their own life or their interests. Furthermore, some of the students may not be interested in the lesson, unless they do get the chance to express their own ideas since the teacher talks too much during the lesson or the other students take many turns; 4) Discipline. Often the quicker students finish the tasks given before the other students. As a result, they may misbehave while waiting for the others to finish. The weaker students, on the other hand, cannot finish the tasks as quickly as the strong ones and may lose their confidence and/or show ill-disciplined behaviour for a variety of reasons related to that. Consequently, mixed abilities may result in classroom management problems.

The author offers some interesting ways to cope with the problems:

1. Teaching should **appeal to all senses**, all learning styles and all intelligences. Moreover, it should be based on a meaningful context for all learners.

2. It is advisable to have **contingency plans** for the early finishers in case they finish the tasks earlier. This contingency plan might be an extra exercise, a handout or a reading passage. Recently, some of the textbooks have been prepared considering the mixed ability classes and include contingency activities in teacher's books. Nevertheless, teachers are the ones who should / could know which contingency plan works better after which activity in their class.

3. All students do not need to carry out an entire **in-class activity**. While every student should do certain parts, only some of the students (weak ones or early finishers) do all of it. In relation to that, the tests could include optional questions. While every student completes some parts of the test, some other parts may have options from which the students choose. Furthermore, different tasks can be given to different learners according to their language progress or interest, or optional tasks can be prepared from which students choose.

4. **Open-ended tasks** or questions (such as writing a letter, an ending of a story/book/film, or a response to a picture) have a variety of possible correct answers instead of a single answer. These tasks allow each learner to perform at his / her own level. Some of the students may be good at understanding but might be weak in expressing themselves orally or in written work; thus, open-ended tasks give them the chance to express themselves without trying to find the one and the only correct answer.

5. It is important for teachers to give students the opportunity to express their ideas, feelings and experiences, though they may lack confidence or enough language knowledge. By **personalizing the tasks**, all students can participate voluntarily. Knowing students' personalities helps the teacher to prepare and adapt materials easily in order to make them interesting or relevant to students, which adds variety to the classroom environment and establishes a positive atmosphere.

6. Students love **games, competitions and dramatisation**, so these are ways of ensuring their interest in the lesson. Regardless of the differences among the students in terms of language level and learning styles, they are motivated to use the target language while they are playing a game or participating in a completion or a role-play.

7. **Group/pair work activities** are useful not only for the teacher to observe students but also for the students to cooperate and to learn from each other. When a strong student works with weaker students, the student can be a source of language/knowledge in the group. The teacher, on the other hand, may form groups of weaker and stronger students separated from each other, and she can give different tasks to these groups. So the stronger and quicker students work with more complicated tasks, whereas the weaker students deal with a simpler task or work with the teacher as a group member.

8. **Extra homework** always helps teachers of mixed ability classes. However, considering the level and the interests of the students, extra work should be of something that the students would enjoy doing. Therefore, a good way of dealing with mixed ability may be individual and team projects. In addition, students would be more enthusiastic to work in such projects if they can choose their topic such as preparing a poster on their favourite extreme sports like parachuting.

9. **Portfolios** are another efficient way of dealing with mixed ability groups. Teachers may ask students to keep all the things they have done during the term including the extra work depending



on their ability or needs. As a result, not only the teacher but also each student has a record of his/her progress during the term. This record also shows the needs of the student for further progress.

10. It is also useful for students to study in **self-access centres**, where they can visit in their free times to study alone, with a peer or a tutor. The main aim of self-access centres is that students decide on what they want to study. While the students can find appropriate materials such as extra exercises, they can also make use of cassettes, videos and /or books to improve their language.

Therefore, we can make a conclusion that gifted and talented students who study in multilevel condition need a special approach from a teacher. It will help them to master a foreign language more effectively.

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