

Of particular interest to me in teaching English to mixed ability classes are:

1. Where does the teacher pitch the lesson? and
2. How are the teachers handling such classes given the wide range of ability within them?

What follows is a summary of my attempts so far to come to terms with the problems. However, I would be very interested to know how other teachers are handling classes with a wide range of abilities.

1. Where does the teacher pitch the lesson?

At the beginning of term two, I decided that basically my lessons must be aimed at the average and brighter pupils. Firstly, they constitute the large majority and secondly, I didn't feel I could 'carry' the weakest pupils along with the rest. I also realised it would be silly (and unfair) to ignore the weakest pupils in the class, as a 'bored' child is usually a 'naughty' one. With this in mind, I have tried to devise activities which would cater for abilities at least some of the time, although my teaching is generally geared to the needs of the majority.

2. How are the teachers handling such classes given the wide range of ability within them?

(a) *Introduction of a class reading scheme* (One period per week)

I introduced a reading scheme at the school I am in using a set of graded readers (*New Active English Readers* – D.H. Howe). I chose this series because the books are attractive and have a picture dictionary of key words appearing at the back. Also in the back of the books are comprehension exercises on the story (stories) from level three up. For the weakest pupils I use the very simple New Zealand readers.

Employing an excellent idea borrowed from a colleague, I have got fifth form volunteers to come in for these reading periods (two per class). While I concentrate on the weakest pupils, one fifth former corrects the exercises (from previously prepared answer cards) and the other helps the remaining pupils with any problems.

The two advantages of this scheme are:

1. I can give individual attention to the weakest members of the class. (I average about five minutes per pupil. This is grossly inadequate but better than nothing.)
2. For one period a week every pupil is working at the right level, at his or her own pace.

(b) *Group Work*

At the end of term one, I introduced group work to all my classes. In each class I have six mixed ability groups (usually six to a group with the boys and girls in each). The pupils spent two half periods just practising moving into their respective groups and arranging classroom furniture with a tolerable level of noise and I think that has paid off.

I don't think group work is a panacea for mixed ability classes but I do believe it has a positive effect on the pupils. The brighter ones are willing to help the weaker ones and the latter seem more willing to contribute.

Preparation of materials *can* be very time consuming but not necessarily so. In one session, for example, (a follow-up to 'asking questions') I selected six pictures from the Visual Aids pack* and gave one to each group. The groups had to write as many

questions as they could think of about their particular picture. While they were doing this, I divided the board into six columns. The pictures were then attached to the board with Blu-tac and six pupils came up at a time and wrote a 'group' question under their respective pictures. Structural errors were corrected as a class. Finally, the pupils copied their 'group questions' into their books. (I've also found that it is far quicker to use a cutter knife and coloured paper when preparing strips for dialogues, matching games etc. than it is to use scissors and card.)

(c) *Graded Oral Questions*

Once a week, I ask the boys in each class to stand up (similarly with the girls). In order to sit down, the pupil must answer a question correctly and fairly quickly. Failure to do so means waiting until everybody else has been given the chance to answer a question before being asked again. I grade the question so that each pupil has a good chance of giving an acceptable answer. Sometimes, I ask bright pupils two or three quick questions. From time to time, I ask the 'non-standing group' (i.e. either the boys or the girls) 'Is that right or wrong?' as an incentive for them to listen carefully to the answers. I find the exercise takes about six minutes and the pupils respond very well. A fairly brisk pace is essential.

(d) *Songs and Games*

I find these go a long way towards 'equalizing' the wide ability range. They are also very enjoyable.

(e) *Short Playlets and Sketches*

These work well with mixed ability classes. The brighter pupils can take the more demanding roles and the weakest pupils can be given the very short, simple roles (even one line!). Each playlet should ideally have

five or six characters. All groups work at the same time to counter embarrassment.

(f) *Written Work*

Grading questions from very easy to difficult is one obvious way of catering to some extent for the different abilities within the class.

One technique I use in the feedback session is to write the questions on the board and leave spaces underneath for the answers. When the majority of the class has finished, I select pupils to write the answer, fill in the blank, etc. Initially, I selected the brighter pupils because they were more confident. Now, I select the average and weaker pupils (depending on the degree of difficulty) and use the brighter pupils to correct their mistakes.

This keeps the whole class active:

1. The brighter pupils correcting
2. The average pupils correcting their mistakes
3. The weakest pupils copying the answers to most — sometimes all — of the questions.

Pupils copying answers into their books is hardly language teaching at its most inspired. Arguably, it's not even teaching. Psychologically, however, I feel it's better for a pupil to hand in a written exercise with the answers than to hand in one without.

Those pupils who can neither read nor write continue to suffer. Fortunately, I only have a handful of these. Any ideas?