OVERVIEW OF MULTI-LEVEL CLASSES

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1. Definition of a large multi-level class

In many of the multi-level workshops, the concept of the multi-level classrooms includes cultural differences among students and between teachers and students; class differences; gender differences; differences in educational backgrounds; differences in motivation, ethnicity, first languages; and learning styles etc... In this writing, multi-level classes include classes with students who use English at a variety of different levels. They include Vietnamese students with different types of learning backgrounds, such as those with lower language skills and generally less vocal students who may naturally segregate themselves from the more outspoken or advanced-level students. For university program, the term multi-level has come to define classes where students from a wide range of English levels, from beginning to advanced, are placed together in a single group. Although students have studied English in high school in Vietnam, their English knowledge is not at the same level in university classes. Moreover, there is an unavoidable problem since each English class has more than forty students, each with different skill levels. Large size classes and mixed levels of English have created challenges as well as advantages for classroom management in the academic years.

This article is intended to make teachers and students aware of their teaching and learning styles and to evaluate their own progress. A lot of attention is given to establishing a good relationship between the students and the teacher through the activities in the class. The article focuses on the idea of providing activities which are extremely useful for both teacher and students. Most activities are carefully designed and they proved to be effective in managing a large multi-level class.

2. Advantages and challenges of multi-level classrooms

While multi-level can enhance students' English language learning experiences, teachers and administrators need to be aware of the special challenges it can pose. Multi-level classes can present challenges to teachers, who must engage the interest of all the students in their classes while helping them achieve their different learning goals. Planning and teaching multi-level classes places a burden on the teacher who must dedicate extra time to class preparation and extra effort to classroom management.

Multi-level classes can also present challenges for administrators, who must prepare to adequately support teachers with appropriate time and opportunities for professional development. Administrators can explore ways to provide additional resources for students, and encourage the building of relationships among students based on extracurricular interests and family related needs.

In addition, administrators need to ensure that teachers are using effective teaching methodology in their classes to provide a positive learning experience for every student. When teaching challenges do arise, teachers, administrators, and students themselves must jointly share in the responsibility for addressing them.

Perhaps the teaching program can not fully meet all the needs of all the students in multi-level classes; but this doesn't mean that it cannot serve them well. By enlightening policymakers and program administrators to the realities of multi-level teaching, by engaging in a wide variety of staff development activities to improve classroom teaching, and by assisting learners to identify and meet their learning needs, the challenge of the multi-level class may be less daunting.

Although many teachers are quick to admit that it is often difficult to orchestrate a class when it is necessary to teach different language levels at the same time, they acknowledge that this situation also produces a vibrant, diverse classroom which provides stimulation and enrichment. These differences, as many teachers have reflected in numerous workshops, do not present themselves as problems; rather, they enrich the communities of students and are often the attraction for instructors to work in this field. The multi-level nature of the class becomes strength rather than a weakness, and teachers often cite that strength as the cornerstone of educational practice.

Learners may work in small groups or pairs at the same skill level or at different levels; with the more advanced students taking on a teaching role, grounding their own learning and developing their communicative skills. During this learning time, teachers rotate among individuals or groups of students to offer more one-on-one attention, support and provide additional help. Teachers need to understand that the multi-level class is intrinsically advantageous to the class dynamic that many activities and materials are successful in such classes, and that adapting and changing plans should happen every day in response to the complex needs of the learners. Achieving the right balance between group and individual work is critical to ensuring that the processes of building community and building basic skills are not in opposition to one another, but truly complement and enhance each other.

Many teachers do not know where to start when manage a multi-level classroom. Getting started can be the most difficult step in getting the multi-level class to work. One of the first things teachers should do when assigned to a multi-level classroom is to determine the needs of the individual members. The needs assessment process allows students to express their individual needs and provides teachers with data that can help them adjust the content of the class to meet student needs (Emmenecker, 2003). One of the ways used to evaluate learners' levels is to set up a placement examination for new students in multi-level classroom. Although this may help teachers determine the language level of the students, placement tests alone cannot determine the personal needs of the individual students. There are a variety of ways to conduct needs assessment. For small classes it is useful to have a quick chat to determine what the students' objectives are. If we have a large class, we may e-mail the question to our students, or have short telephone conversations with them. Here are some examples that could be listed from which students can choose:

- To improve four skills
- To study more in foreign countries
- To become a future teacher
- To work in the office

Make a conscious effort to monitor the needs of our individual students regularly. Keep a chart for ourselves, and alter it as our students' needs change. We may find that some students feel uncomfortable, while others feel that they are focusing too much on a skill that they will never use in the real world. Since students' goals often shift over time, flexible resources and materials are the needs in more practiced classrooms, where group work and discussion are central to their learning needs. We can summarize some important points:

Advantages of multi-level classrooms

- Students are able to learn at their own pace.
- Students learn to work well in a group.
- Students become independent learners.
- Students develop strong relationships with their peers.
- Students become partners in learning.

Challenges of multi-level classrooms

- Finding appropriate teaching resources and material.

- Organizing appropriate groupings within the class.

- Building an effective self-access centre in the classroom.

- Determining the individual needs of each student.

- Ensuring that all students are challenged and interested.

- Enforcing English only policies when teacher is occupied and students are working in small groups or pairs. (www.english club, 2009)

Teachers need to look at the advantages of the multi-level classroom and employ strategies to overcome the challenges so that they can achieve success.

Multi-level lesson planning and classroom management must include strategies for organizing group, pair, and individual work. Teachers need to take into consideration the following principles in teaching multi-level classes.

3. Principles of teaching multi-level classes

- Lower language level in English may prevent students from getting the extra help they may need and which the more advanced students might provide. So building connections among participants serves many advantages. These establish the safety necessary for learning, creating a climate where students learn with and from each other, breaking down the isolation. The novelty of a mixed class is sometimes met with confusion and resistance. But when learners can share a problem with the class; discussion, listening, reading, and writing are sparked and the students move toward collaborative problem solving. Students can build confidence by hearing the exchanges plus the peer corrections and suggestions.

- At the same time, the diverse needs of the learners present challenges for the teacher and require (1) training, experience, and extra time for preparing lessons and materials; (2) teacher collaboration; and (3) program support. Lesson planning and classroom management are essential elements of a successful multi-level class. If the instructor plans activities that meet only the needs of learners whose skills fall in the middle, those learners with lower skills may become frustrated and those with more advanced skills may become

bored (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

- Multi-level classes make sense in terms of student achievement in reading, writing, listening and speaking. We believe that knowledge is socially constructed through the interaction of people and texts. This means that people become increasingly literate and knowledgeable about the world not only by working on activities and reading, listening, speaking and writing on their own, but also by actively engaging with others, talking, discussing, and creating text as it relates to their own experiences and perspectives. (Judy Hofer and Pat Larson).

- Managing the classroom is easier when the teacher knows what students want. Of course, learners in the same class may want to study different things. Knowing what they want can help a teacher to plan groupings: who needs more writing, who just wants to talk, who is willing to help, and who needs to be quiet. To be successful in teaching multi-level groups, we think it is important to plan a variety of flexible and interrelated activities and to always have more than enough on hand. Materials or activities that you prepare can always be set aside for use at another time or with another group (Cathy Shank and Lynda Terrill, 1995). Beginning with the assumption that no single textbook will offer all the materials and exercises that a multi-level class will need frees teachers to work with learners to create activities that are appropriate and necessary.

- The English level of Vietnamese students is upgraded year by year. At present the English language staff has to prepare appropriate teaching materials and activities to meet students' needs and to conform to a multi-level classroom. In addition, the students' higher levels require improvement, supplementation, or even replacement of the current syllabus, materials and even classroom activities. A shared bank of materials with activities in developing learning process is the main concern for English teachers at the moment.

There are several suitable activities we can select to apply for multi-level classrooms.

4. Suggested activities

Experienced teachers have studied a great deal over the years about making multi-level classes run more smoothly and inclusively. Using many types of activities makes it possible for the teacher

to address not only the multi-level nature of the class but the learning styles of the individual class members. The following suggestions have been distilled from many experienced researchers as well as teachers who contributed their efforts on the language teaching process.

- Whole-Group Warm-up: Starting your class with a whole-group warm-up is a great way to foster a sense of community in a multi-level class. Grouping strategies are essential in a well-run multi-level class. Teachers should determine when whole-group activities, small-group activities, pair work, and individual work are appropriate. In addition, teachers should understand the different ways their students learn and demonstrate proficiency, and group the students accordingly (Kallenbach & Viens, 2002). If possible, use a wide variety of groupings to keep things interesting for the class.

- A Topic-Driven Curriculum: Negotiate with students which themes or topics they would like to see addressed in the curriculum. Students can be united around topic in which they all share an interest. In mixed-level classes, less advanced students might fall behind if only the second language is used (Schmidt, 1995). When possible, teachers may use learners' native language to clarify instructions so that all students remain engaged. Additionally, teachers may ask one student to help another student who speaks the same language so that students can negotiate meaning together (Condelli, Yoon, Wrigley, Cronen, & Seburn, 2003). Remind students that the best way to practice and improve a new language is to teach it to someone else.

- Information Gap Activities: Information gap activities offer paired practice where each partner has only one part of the whole and they work together to fill the gap. Effective communication is the goal. This activity is student-centered, to be successful, both partners need to speak accurately and listen closely. Teachers circulate and, if needed, work with individuals. (www. ESL Language Centers, 2000)

- Different Texts: A variety of text types such as essays, songs, poems, fables, plays and short stories can be used first to practice decoding of vocabulary in context with subsequent follow-up activities such as retellings, preparing summaries and so forth to ensure use and reuse of the most useful new vocabulary encountered. We also have found that such activities as adapting movies, movie excerpts, conversation grids, and listening activities, engender confidence as well as independent language production. Teachers who are familiar with such techniques can prepare lessons without undue time and anxiety.

- Long-Term Projects: In project-based learning, learners are presented with a problem to solve or a product to develop. Learners working in pairs or teams can develop skills needed to plan, organize, negotiate, and arrive at a consensus. Even learners at beginning levels are able to develop these skills, as they can benefit from the collaborative nature of team work (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998).

Projects can be organized around themes, and then students can work in groups based on their interests rather than their English proficiency levels. Teachers may use this approach, known as thematic instruction, to unify a multi-level class (Bell, 2004). When designing project-based learning activities and when grouping students in the classroom, teachers can draw on cooperative learning approaches. Several recent research studies with adult English language learners have noted the benefits of cooperative learning when working with students in the workplace (Gerdes & Wilberschied, 2003), with nonnative English speaking community college students (Chaves, 2003), and with English language learners in undergraduate programs (Storch, 2005). Follow-up activities, such as games and discussions can then be based on the theme.

- Self-Access Materials: Make sure everything is well labeled and organized. The materials should reflect the needs and interests of the students in the class. Self- access materials can be intimidating for students if you just have a shelf full of textbooks. It is best to photocopy many copies of worksheets and exercises. If you have students who are preparing for something such as the TOEIC test, have a file marked TOEIC Practice sheets. If your students need to improve their listening skills, have an audio shelf with an easy-to-use CD/tape player and level-appropriate resources (CD's and worksheets). Rather than having guided readers, it is better to have photocopies of stories or articles with corresponding tasks (such as writing activities) stapled right to the readings. Teachers can keep a collection of self-access materials in their classrooms so that students can select materials and work individually. Self-access materials should include activities from all skill areas and levels, and each task should be set up so that learners need minimal, if any, assistance from the teacher to accomplish the task. (Shank &Terrill, 1995).

- Crossword Puzzles: Despite their English vocabulary levels, each student will bring a wide variety of knowledge to the group to help fill in the puzzle. (www. englishclub.com, 2009).

- Folktales: It is easy to find different levels of common folk or fairytales. These work well in children's classes, and there are even some that are appropriate for adults. If you have difficulty finding a folktale that is at a suitable level, you can always rewrite one yourself and use it again and again when you teach. The follow up activities for folktales are unlimited, but include comprehension questions, group discussions, vocabulary activities, creative writing exercise, and role-playing, all of which can be done in various groupings.

- Computer Lab Assignments: If your school has a computer lab for students to use, or if you have a computer in your classroom, allow pairs to do online English lessons (www. englishclub.com, 2009).

To successfully engage all the learners in their classes, teachers are compelled to seek out practical solutions in the form of techniques and classroom management ideas.

5. Practical solutions

- Faced with the challenges of managing a multilevel class, teachers need support from program administrators in order to successfully serve the learners in their classes. Educational programs should consider offering counseling services to help students understand and navigate the different education options available to them. Counselors can: (1) assist students in setting goals for their education and developing plans to achieve those goals (S. Reder, 2006), (2) provide frequent and systematic opportunities for learners to give their ideas about the program and its effectiveness in meeting their needs, and (3) develop a good referral system so that students are aware of their options for English language courses (Balliro, 1997).

- As we have known, the more learners know each other and begin to build a community in the classroom, the more confident and successful they are in their language learning. So, in the first days of multi-level class teachers need to try many ice-breaking activities related to personal identification: whole-group warm-up, exchanging name

cards, find the differences, bingo, crossword puzzles, a topic-driven curriculum and more.

- Also, different texts or information gap activities can provide opportunities for learners. Those with limited proficiency have an opportunity to interact with more proficient English speakers, and advanced learners benefit by using their English skills to help lower level students negotiate meaning. Students in multi-level classes can learn to work together across differences and develop learning communities in which members learn from one another's strengths (Corley, 2005). This class will be successful because the learners learned to work together well, express their selections, and also because they all learned to be flexible.

- As educators, teachers try to learn from the experiences students share when they enter the programs. Once learners and teachers know and respect each other, multi-level activities are the natural, easily adaptive tools to use, so that all can learn together. Teachers should never forget to create a sense of belonging to a group - which is extremely important in large classes, where shy or weaker students might feel left out. Very often group work is mixed with individual work and once again teacher proves to be sympathetic towards students' feelings - encouraging individualization and personalization together with group activities. Teacher leads the group, keeps everything under control and is the point of reference for all the students, and at the same time he interacts with the group.

- With regular assessment, students with a range of abilities can see that they are progressing at their own pace. Ongoing needs assessments may include standardized tests and alternative assessments, one-on-one interviews with learners, group discussions, and learner observations (Isserlis, 2000). Long - term projects allow students to assume responsibility for various tasks, depending on strengths and interests. Students can participate in a variety of ways and all contribute to a unified effort with an actual end result. It is also helpful to investigate with students how they learn best so teachers can help students work from strengths.

- Multi-level classes need to be staffed by experienced teachers (Shank & Terrill, 1995). Teachers through suitable activities will talk with students directly about the multi-level nature of the class, acknowledging the context and inviting students to give ongoing feedback about their experiences in the class (Balliro, 2005).

- Teachers need to prepare parallel lessons for learners at different levels. Planning should include strategies for managing a variety of group, pair, and individual activities (Shank & Terrill, 1995). Learners working in pairs or teams can develop skills needed to plan, organize, negotiate, and arrive at a consensus. Even learners at beginning levels are able to develop these skills, as they can benefit from the collaborative nature of team work (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998; Wrigley, 1998). Keeping all students working on activities and lessons based on the same theme is a great way of maintaining a class-like atmosphere in a multi-level classroom. Not only will this help students feel like they all belong to the group, it will save prep time and make teachers feel more organized. Also, teachers have to assess learners' interests as well as abilities, and to plan instructions to ensure that students' learning goals are met.

6. Conclusion

The teacher is no longer simply the central authority figure and decision maker in the classroom but someone who embodies the role of a knowledgeable mentor or guide. Great attention focuses on the importance of maintaining interest among the students, exploiting the variety of such large classes instead of being hindered by it. Variety can lead to collaboration among the students as they may learn from one another. Language learners cannot be passive recipients in such multi-level classrooms. They must become more independent and learn to make choices and to initiate learning activities. They should be actively responsible for their own learning and aware of teaching and learning strategies that will help them improve.

In fact, higher level students can prove to be of great help for weaker ones, thus creating a sort of learning chain. It proves to be effective in managing a large multi-level class. Instructional materials should ideally offer choices to teachers and learners; they should be flexible and allow for adaptation to specific learners needs and contexts. They should be designed to facilitate the personal growth of both teacher and learners in multi-level

classes. The new roles may seem daunting to many, but they are highly desirable in that the teaching principles, activities and solutions we propose here will encourage the positive development of both learners and teachers. Our own hope is to move our program even further in the direction of becoming a multi-level organization, meaning that we do not simply offer multi-level classes but throughout our organization, students, teachers, administrators, and board members are sharing decision making and working together to make a positive difference in the communities where we live and work■

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TOPICS FOR 2010

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