Strategies for Mixed-Level Classes: Participation and Grouping
by Lena Barrantes

When the school year starts, you might find yourself faced with a single class full of students with varied language proficiency levels. Instructors in both ESL and EFL are often faced with this situation, and they may experience the overwhelming feeling of witnessing beginner students (with very little ability to communicate) mix with advanced students (who are able to handle almost any communicative situation)—and students at any point on the continuum between those extremes.

In the mixed-level classroom (MLC), instructors are challenged to develop strategic techniques to provide all students with equal opportunities for learning. Be prepared for such a complex scenario in the new school year with the following strategies.

The Learners, The Context: Defining the Mixed-Level Class

Even when the MLC is said to be universal, finding one uniform definition can pose a challenge. Multiple interpretations of the phenomenon have put emphasis on different aspects of students and learning within a classroom, for example, styles, skills, and proficiency levels. In this article, I address the aspect of learner language proficiency level.

Many efforts to ease the difficulties resulting from the MLC are directed toward task differentiation (Lindstromberg, 2004; Rose, 1997), material adaptation (Budden, 2008), open-ended tasks (Barrantes, 2013), and affective recommendations (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015). Added to these, assertive grouping techniques can also be a strategy to support learners' emotional struggles, which can be caused by anxiety arising from sharing the language classroom with classmates with different proficiency levels. In this article, I provide concrete examples to ease the MLC through mindful planning of student grouping and participation.

Technique 1: Planned In-Class Participation

Language learners' level and type of participation is usually linked to their proficiency level. In MLCs, students tend to face a disparity in quality and quantity of participation. Students with a higher proficiency level may take an active role while students with a low proficiency level may display passive behavior that limits in-class engagement and consequently slows down their

learning progress. Under this premise, finding strategic and planned ways to elicit learners' participation can assure less limited and more equal engagement from students.

Strategy 1: Successive Order Calling

In this type of spontaneous calling, you call out students by following a pattern so that they can predict who is going to be called on next. One idea is to start with a student in one corner and proceed by calling on students for each successive question or exercise one by one in a specific order (e.g., clockwise, row-by-row). Students know when they will be called, which allows them some time for preparation (Higley, 2018). Assigning a code (number or letter to each student) at the beginning of the class can help in this process. As participation is requested, keep track on the board. In that way, learners will know when their turn is coming and be ready to participate.

A-day-ahead or a-week-ahead assigned participation can also benefit students. This type of participation differs from assigned presentation in its length and purpose. Assigned participation should be short and simple. Though this idea promotes less spontaneous production, it requires extra language practice. Keys to its effectiveness are to keep it simple and to use a conversational tone so that it will not cause unnecessary anxiety or elaborated preparation on the part of the learner.

Strategy 2: Role Assigning

Group students for a presentation or report and have them take a specific role within their group. This promotes each students' participation at their own level. In addition, leadership is distributed, and learners' different behaviors, preferences, ways of working, and language proficiencies are individually catered to. It is always important to rotate groups and roles so that responsibilities are varied.

Strategy 3: Random or Cold Calling

This strategy can be used only when the teacher has created a supportive classroom atmosphere where students feel okay taking risks. With cold calling, you would simply choose a student at random, regardless of proficiency level, to respond to a question or participate in a particular task. The first priority with this strategy is to avoid humiliating students; this strategy definitely puts on the spot shy, unprepared, and less proficient students. However, the key to avoid this is giving them the opportunity to save face. One way to do so is by allowing students to say "I don't know" while you follow up the conversation with related questions.

There are many creative materials that language instructors have designed to aid cold calling. To avoid having students feel targeted, you could blindly pick cards with the students' names from a shuffled deck or a hat. In this technological era, hand-held computer software and apps that randomize the calling of students are also available (e.g., Random Team Generator). These approaches are beneficial because they distance the instructor from the selection, and students understand that there is no bias involved.

The goal for directly addressing planned grouping is to enhance students' opportunities to have equal learning achievement without putting language proficiency in the spotlight. The idea of purposefully planning grouping is to encourage and strengthen participation from all students during all stages of the class. The next section describes a set of strategies to mindfully plan that grouping.

Technique 2: Strategic Grouping

Traditional group and pair work class arrangements have proved to have advantages and disadvantages. For the most part, both promote student-student interaction, maximize speaking time, and provide a less threatening way to participate than individual work. The techniques you use to group students may ease the negative consequences of the MLC.

Strategy 1: Grouping by Proficiency Level

This strategy may be effective only if you've created a collaborative rapport in your classroom so that students know how to demonstrate mutual respect and encouragement. Otherwise, subgroups can generate a status-based relationship that can result in division rather than collaboration. If you have a collaborative environment in place, students may benefit in each of their roles either as mentors or mentees.

In the case of high proficient learners, having the opportunity to support less proficient students may help them gain a better understanding of lesson content because they can improve their cognitive abilities and presentation skills through explaining and elaborating concepts. Less proficient students can benefit from hearing and interacting more closely with classmates and from assistance, encouragement, and stimulation from students with higher levels of language proficiency.

Strategy 2: Grouping by Age

Language instructors in private institutes or in adult learning programs may have to teach across age levels. When age is a factor in your MLC, you can use this variable to group students. It is likely that students with similar ages share the same language learning purposes and challenges. Their range of experiences, skills, and interests may encourage active engagement in class activities.

Strategy 3: Random Grouping

Random grouping is generally considered an equitable technique. Students and teacher must be ready for the unexpected. This technique assures that students have a chance to interact with all classmates. Here are a few ways to randomly group students:

- *Color and Animal Codes*: Prepare different card sets in different colors or with sets of animals. Use these cards by handing them out randomly prior to each activity and then asking students with similar or different colors/animals to group.

- *Alphabetical Order*: Using the first or last letter in students' given names or surnames, ask learners to group. To add an element of surprise, you can rotate the category so that instead of names only you can ask students to group themselves based on the first letter of their neighborhood, birth month, country of origin (in the case of multilingual classes), or any other category you can think of.

- *Matching Pairs*: Prepare slips of paper with well-known pairs of celebrities, movies/books and authors, foods (e.g., peanut butter and jelly, spaghetti and meatballs), and phrases (e.g., "It's now or never," "Don't worry, be happy," "safe and sound"). Once you have distributed them, tell your students to find their partners. The list of possible pairs to match may be long; inviting students to determine which matches can work gives them a sense of involvement in class decisions, and they can also serve to provide some opportunities to teach about culture.

Final Thoughts

There is no single best strategy for all groups, and there is not even a single best strategy for a particular group, but you can continue to try varied strategies to see what works best for your learners. Be mindful and appreciative of the unique individual and group preferences of your students. Through careful observation and constant information-gathering, you can identify learners needs. Once you've taken a clear picture of your own teaching and learning conditions, you can find ways to connect and engage your students using class characteristics and strategic participation and grouping techniques.

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