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## TEACHING ESP IN MIXED ABILITY CLASSES

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*This article deals with the challenges English language teachers regularly face when teaching ESP in mixed-ability classes. It discusses mixed-ability factors and problems in different-level classes, benefits and peculiarities of teaching English in multilevel classes. There have been defined the variety of effective strategies and methods that can be successfully applied in the process of English language teaching in mixed-ability groups.*

**Key words:** *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), mixed-ability classes, strategies, methods, engineering students.*

One of the biggest challenges of the ESP teacher is working with so-called mixed-ability classes. Multilevel or mixed ability class usually refers to the differences that exist in a group in terms of different levels of language proficiency. The differences which cause problems in these classes are in language learning ability, learning experience, mother tongue, cultural background, preferred learning style, motivation and others. Even though students are grouped according to their placement test scores, their progress rates are bound to be at different levels. Due to the mentioned differences students react to the teaching material and teaching methods individually. It is difficult to find activities that involve all the students without some getting bored and others being confused, insecure or discouraged. Weaker students not being able to follow the pace, to understand information or to express their ideas and stronger students not being tolerant to them may result in classroom management problems. Thus, teachers need to have a range of strategies for managing mixed ability classes [1; 144].

Despite the importance of the problem mentioned above, the analysis of native scientific and methodological literature of researches (Ur P., Hess N., Bremner S., Harmer J., Aikyna T. Yu.) has shown that there is a lack of scientific works devoted to investigation of strategies and methods that can be successfully applied in the process of teaching ESP in mixed-ability groups. Taking into consideration the deficiency of system development of methods and approaches to teaching ESP in mixed-ability classes, the following article is focused on studying all sorts of possible solutions of the problem arising from the necessity to teach ESP in mixed-ability groups and suggest the most effective strategies and methods in ESP course.

According to the purposes we have defined the following tasks to analyze:

- identifying factors and problems associated with teaching English in mixed-ability classes for engineering students;
- clarifying the benefits and peculiarities of teaching English in mixed-ability classes;
- analyzing and suggesting useful strategies and activities that are important in technical classroom.

It seems fair to suggest that this issue is of top priority as students tend to come from different learning backgrounds, they may differ significantly in the speed of acquiring knowledge, motivation, learning styles, etc. [2; 48]. There are many factors that influence the characteristics of the learners that make up one single class. Some of these factors include: age or maturity, intelligence, language aptitude, language levels, mother tongue, learner autonomy and attitude towards the subject. And teachers may feel frustrated by the challenges they face in their mixed ability classrooms and may not know how to create successful learning and teaching environments that meet the needs of all learners in a single class. Bremner S. states that the ‘biggest stumbling block to effective mixed ability teaching would seem to be teacher attitude. Teachers lack the knowledge of strategies to use in the classroom for a wide range of ability.’ Teachers who are familiar with the different abilities and needs of their learners and use mixed ability teaching strategies effectively are much better equipped to meet the diverse learning needs of their learners [3; 54].

According to Ur, some of the challenges teachers of mixed ability classes may face include [4; 303]:

*Discipline* – Teachers may find mixed ability classes are chaotic or difficult to control. Discipline problems occur when learners lose concentration, get bored, or behave in a disruptive manner. Some reasons why mixed ability classes may be more difficult to control may be because different learners may find the subject matter easier or more difficult to grasp, weaker learners may require more assistance from the teacher, or more advanced learners may dominate aspects of the lessons.

*Interest* – Learners may differ in their learning styles, motivation and interests. Teachers of mixed ability classes may find it difficult to provide content and activities that are motivating and interesting to all learners in a class.

*Materials* – Materials are usually rigidly aimed at a certain kind of learner and may not offer teachers options or flexibility.

*Individual awareness* – Teachers may find it difficult to get to know and follow the progress of all learners. In classes where there are many differences, teachers are not able to devote time and attention equally to all learners.

*Participation* – In mixed ability classes, more advanced learners tend to participate more actively than weaker learners. Lack of participation or attention from the teacher, may further affect weaker learners proficiency in the subject.

Let us consider some of the common strategies teachers can follow to promote success in their multilevel classes.

*Needs assessment.* Teachers must determine what each learner needs and wants to learn. Ongoing needs assessments may include standardized tests and alternative assessments, one-on-one interviews with learners, group discussions, and learner observations. 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.

*Supportive learning environment.* It is important to create a supportive learning environment in the classroom, where learners feel confident and able to perform to the best of their ability.

Classroom management. By managing classes effectively, teachers can ensure that learners will be involved as much as possible in the lesson. Classroom management techniques include praise and encouragement, using the board effectively and managing learning activities by giving good instructions, asking concept checking questions, using pair and group work, setting time limits, monitoring the activity and including feedback on the activity.

Learning to learn. Teach learners how to be resourceful so that they know where to find help if they get stuck. Provide learners with the goal for the lesson and encourage learners to review and assess whether they have achieved the goal by the end of the lesson.

Variety. Vary topics, methods of teaching, focus, materials and activities. Variety will generate learner interest and motivation.

Grouping. Use a range of interaction patterns in class. Learners should work in groups, pairs and individually. Groupings should be changed often, thereby giving learners an opportunity to work with different learners.

Pace. Teachers must be mindful of the pace of their lessons. Teaching a class too slowly or too quickly may lead to boredom or frustration. A teacher must be aware of his/her learners' abilities and pitch the pace of the lesson accordingly.

Collaboration. Getting learners to work together and cooperating has a number of benefits for the learners and teacher. Learners develop their learner autonomy and learn from their peers, rather than always being reliant on the teacher. Learners who collaborate on tasks learn how to compromise, negotiate meaning and develop self-evaluation skills. Collaboration tasks can involve project work as well as pair or group activities [3; 89].

In conclusion, it needs to be pointed out that in spite of the fact that the problem of teaching ESP in mixed-ability group tends to be one of the biggest and the most challenging teaching problems, it can still be successfully solved by applying strategies described above.

On the basis of the literary sources studied it should be noted that the English language teacher dealing with a mixed-ability class has a number of advantages. Mixed ability classes provide a rich pool of human resources [4; 278]. Learners come

to class with different knowledge, experiences, opinions, ideas and interests which can be drawn on to provide interesting, varied student-centered lessons [3; 170]. Such diverse classes are interesting to teach and provide greater opportunity for innovation and creativity. There is 'educational value' in mixed ability classrooms, as through their interaction, students can help and learn from each other [4; 305]. Mixed ability classes provide opportunity for teachers to develop themselves professionally, as teachers need to adopt a problem solving approach to the difficulties they face and experiment with a range of teaching approaches.

### References

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### **Викладання англійської мови для спеціальних цілей студентам з різним рівнем підготовки**

*Статтю присвячено актуальним проблемам, що виникають у процесі викладання англійської мови для спеціальних цілей студентам з різним рівнем підготовки. Розглядаються деякі аспекти, переваги та особливості викладання у багаторівневих групах. У статті визначені ефективні методи та прийоми, що застосовуються у курсі викладання технічної іноземної мови студентам неоднорідних груп.*

*Ключові слова: англійська мова для спеціальних цілей, групи з різним рівнем підготовки. методи, прийоми, студенти технічних спеціальностей.*