

Adapting Speaking Materials for Mixed Ability Classes

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Abstract: *Mixed ability classes, characterized by diverse levels of language proficiency among students, present unique challenges in language teaching, especially in developing speaking skills. This article explores various strategies for adapting speaking materials to effectively engage and support learners of different abilities. It focuses on differentiated instruction, scaffolding, flexible grouping, and formative assessment. Differentiated instruction involves tailoring content, processes, and products to meet diverse needs. Scaffolding provides temporary support structures to assist students in achieving higher levels of understanding and skill. Flexible grouping promotes peer learning and collaboration through strategic organization of students, while formative assessment provides ongoing feedback to guide instructional decisions and support student progress. By implementing these strategies, educators can create an inclusive learning environment that maximizes the potential of all students, fostering their speaking skills regardless of their starting proficiency levels.*

Keywords: *Speaking, English, learning*

Introduction

In EFL (English as Foreign Language) teaching speaking skills in mixed ability classes presents unique challenges for educators, who must ensure that all students, regardless of their proficiency levels, can engage meaningfully and make progress.

The ability to speak effectively in a new language is a crucial skill, central to communication and integration in both educational settings and broader social contexts. However, traditional, one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching speaking skills are often inadequate for mixed ability classes. To address this issue, educators must employ a range of adaptive strategies that cater to the diverse needs of their students. This article explores key strategies for adapting speaking materials for mixed ability classes: differentiated instruction, scaffolding, flexible grouping, use of technology, and formative assessment. By implementing these strategies, educators can create a classroom environment that not only supports all learners but also maximizes their potential.

Literature Review

Definition of Mixed Ability Classes

A mixed ability class, also known as a heterogeneous class, is an educational setting where students with varying levels of ability, knowledge, skills, and learning needs are grouped together (Hallam & Ireson, 2007). This diversity can pertain to academic performance, language proficiency,

cognitive abilities, and even social and emotional development. The concept of mixed ability classes is prevalent across different educational systems and is particularly significant in the context of language learning (Tomlinson, 2014).

Challenges in adapting speaking materials for mixed ability classes

Diverse Proficiency Levels

One of the most significant challenges in mixed ability classes is catering to the wide range of language proficiency levels. Students may vary from beginners with limited vocabulary and grammatical understanding to advanced learners who are fluent and confident speakers. This disparity can make it difficult to select speaking materials that are appropriately challenging for all students. Materials that are too easy for advanced students may fail to engage them, while materials that are too difficult for beginners can lead to frustration and disengagement (Tomlinson, 2014).

Varied Learning Styles

Students in mixed ability classes often have different learning styles and preferences. Some may be visual learners who benefit from seeing written words and images, while others may be auditory learners who excel through listening and speaking activities. Kinesthetic learners, on the other hand, may need hands-on activities to fully engage with the material. Designing speaking activities that cater to these diverse learning styles is complex and

requires a careful balance of different instructional approaches (Dörnyei, 2005).

Differing Paces of Learning

Students in mixed ability classes often learn at different paces. Some students may quickly grasp new concepts and excel in speaking activities, while others may need more time and practice to achieve the same level of proficiency. This variation in learning pace can make it challenging to maintain a cohesive classroom environment where all students feel included and supported. Teachers must find ways to keep faster learners engaged without leaving slower learners behind (Hallam & Ireson, 2007).

Motivation and Engagement

Motivation levels can vary significantly among students in mixed ability classes. Some students may be highly motivated and enthusiastic about learning to speak a new language, while others may lack confidence or interest. This disparity can affect participation in speaking activities and overall classroom dynamics. Keeping all students motivated and engaged requires the use of diverse and appealing materials that can capture the interest of different learners (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998).

Classroom Management

Managing a classroom with diverse abilities can be challenging, especially during speaking activities where students are often required to interact with each other. Ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to participate and that more dominant students do not overshadow quieter or less confident peers requires careful planning and facilitation. Effective classroom management strategies are essential to create an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and heard (Harmer, 2007).

Resource Availability

Access to appropriate resources can also be a challenge. Teachers may struggle to find or create speaking materials that cater to the diverse needs of their students. This includes finding audio-visual aids, real-life speaking scenarios, and interactive activities that are suitable for different proficiency levels. Limited access to technology and other educational resources can further exacerbate this issue, particularly in under-resourced educational settings (Blake, 2008).

Assessment and Feedback

Providing meaningful and constructive feedback on speaking activities is crucial for student

development, yet it can be challenging in a mixed ability class. Teachers must balance the need to give detailed feedback to individual students with the constraints of time and class size. Additionally, designing assessments that fairly evaluate students' speaking skills across different proficiency levels requires careful consideration to ensure that all students are assessed equitably (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Adapting Speaking Materials for Mixed Ability Classes

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction involves tailoring speaking activities to meet the varied proficiency levels within the classroom. Strategies include:

1. **Varying Task Complexity:** Provide different versions of the same speaking task, with varying levels of complexity. For example, beginners might describe a simple picture, while advanced students discuss a more complex scenario or issue (Tomlinson, 2014).

2. **Choice Boards:** Offer students a range of speaking activities to choose from, catering to different interests and proficiency levels. This empowers students to select tasks that match their comfort and challenge levels.

3. **Tiered Assignments:** Design tasks that address the same core skill but at different levels of difficulty. For instance, a storytelling activity could range from using a basic sequence of events for beginners to incorporating detailed narratives and dialogue for advanced students.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding provides temporary support to help students gradually build their speaking skills. Techniques include:

1. **Pre-speaking Activities:** Engage students in activities that prepare them for the speaking task, such as brainstorming vocabulary, practicing key phrases, or watching related videos. This helps lower-level students build confidence and background knowledge (Gibbons, 2002).

2. **Modeling and Role-Playing:** Demonstrate speaking tasks through modeling and role-playing, allowing students to see and practice the language in context. This can be particularly effective for visual and auditory learners.

3. **Sentence Starters and Frameworks:** Provide sentence starters, frameworks, and visual aids to

support students in structuring their responses. Over time, reduce these supports as students become more proficient (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

Flexible Grouping

Flexible grouping involves organizing students in various configurations to facilitate learning. Approaches include:

1. Homogeneous Grouping: Group students with similar proficiency levels for certain activities, allowing for targeted instruction and practice at an appropriate level (Lou et al., 1996).

2. Heterogeneous Grouping: Mix students of different proficiency levels, enabling peer learning and support. Higher-level students can assist and model language for lower-level peers, fostering a collaborative learning environment (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

3. Interest-Based Grouping: Organize groups based on shared interests to increase engagement and motivation. This can make speaking activities more relevant and enjoyable for students.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment involves ongoing evaluation to guide instruction and support student progress. Techniques include:

1. Self-Assessment: Encourage students to reflect on their speaking skills and set personal goals. Self-assessment tools can help students become more aware of their strengths and areas for improvement (Andrade & Du, 2007).

2. Peer Assessment: Implement peer assessment where students provide feedback on each other's speaking performance. This fosters a collaborative learning environment and helps students develop critical listening and evaluation skills (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

3. Teacher Feedback: Provide regular, constructive feedback on speaking activities, focusing on specific aspects of language use such as pronunciation, fluency, and coherence. Personalized feedback helps students understand their progress and areas for development.

Conclusion

Adapting speaking materials for mixed ability classes requires a multifaceted approach that considers the diverse needs of students. By implementing differentiated instruction, scaffolding, flexible grouping, and formative assessment,

educators can create an inclusive and supportive learning environment. These strategies not only help students develop their speaking skills but also ensure that all learners, regardless of their proficiency levels, can engage meaningfully and achieve their language learning goals.

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