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Leveraging the Dynamics of the Mixed Level Classroom: A Materials Collection

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School for International Training

INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONAL PROJECT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in TESOL

(Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)

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Abstract

A number of studies have noted the rise in student demographic diversity and the heightened significance of the mixed-level classroom; however, a consensus on the appropriate methods and materials to address these developments remains to be reached. Educators are anticipated to address the needs of students with a variety of abilities, backgrounds, and interests in a singular class. Less proficient students face overstimulation whilst more proficient students face understimulation. How can the challenges of the mixed-level classroom be recast into strengths? The mixed-level classroom environment calls for student investment, real language, and familiar processes. Methods such as peer tutoring, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, goal-setting, and scaffolding are utilized to engage all levels of students. This paper aims to examine the unique dynamics of the mixed level classroom and collect materials appropriate for a classroom that is engaging and relevant to all levels of students.

Keywords: mixed-level classroom, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, materials development, needs assessment

This paper is meant as a guide for those working with mixed-level classrooms. As this project is part of my Master's degree in teaching English as a foreign language, many of the activities are set in a language classroom. However, there are principles and practices included that can hopefully help teachers of varying subjects. It is my sincerest hope that this paper can help others evaluate their teaching situations, feel inspired, and leverage the dynamics of the mixed-level classroom.

The context of the English language classroom has changed considerably over the last few decades. A student learning English today may be learning English as a third or fourth language. The demographic of English language learning students has transformed considerably. The new ELL, or English language learner, could be an immigrant, an international student, or a learner of multiple languages. In one classroom, a student with a doctorate degree could be seated next to an illiterate student. This diversity is especially customary in an adult language classroom. These drastic differences between individual students' education and language levels can prove challenging to address. Still, the mixed level classroom is becoming more common and educators must adapt to try and cater to every level of student.

When reviewing approaches to the mixed level classroom, some sources advocate for meticulously curating materials and information on the students that can be carefully included in lessons (e.g. Sjolie, 2002; Tomlinson, 2001), while others suggest retaining the same material but adding supports or varied student roles (e.g. Bowler & Parminter, 2002; Lynch, 2009; Skehan, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Belonging to the former category, differentiated instruction has become a popular, but controversial proposal. Critics question the practicality of this approach, and the difference between theory and practice (e.g. Aftab, 2015; Yavuz, 2020). Despite different approaches to the mixed level classroom, multiple sources highlight the importance of working beyond the students' comfort levels, of cooperative learning, and a shared ultimate goal of gradual independence.

Mixed level classrooms are not a new phenomenon. With the increasingly globalized world, the diversification of the student population is increasing. Teachers facing this reality are put under immense

pressure to meet the needs of a varied classroom despite lacking resources and training. My goal is to curate guiding frameworks, activities, and tools that will support teachers in the mixed level classroom.

Background

I have experienced both sides of the mixed level classroom. As a student, I have felt the frustration of being left behind during a class activity or using class time to review the lower level material for other students. As a teacher, I hope to create a classroom environment that stimulates each level of learner and values different contributions. In terms of biases, I predominantly have experience with the Western classroom. My experiences in one type of classroom may influence me towards certain ideas and push me away from others that I have not encountered before. Hopefully, this project will provide mixed level educators of many contexts important goals and theories to guide them in lesson development.

Literature Review

To begin, I will examine several sources on the topic of mixed levels in the classroom. These sources will be examined chronologically, ending with the most recent publication. First, Dennis Sjolie's article (2002) explores unlikely achievement in the mixed level classroom and what fosters it. Then, Merve Bekiryaici (2015) cites Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978) and identifies scaffolding and collaborative context as keys to the success of the mixed level classroom. Published in the same year, Gordon Carlson (2015) argues the benefits of idea sharing through the use of self-learning portfolios. Subsequently, Shu-Chin Su and Eleen Liang (2017) present a case study and claim that cooperative learning and game-based teaching improve student engagement and retention in mixed level classrooms. Finally, Marilyn Abbot (2019) highlights three task-based learning frameworks that allow for adaptation in the heterogeneous classroom. I aspire to explore the ideas behind these sources, pinpoint commonalities, and assemble a list of best practices.

Current ELLs "come from a much wider variety of linguistic, educational, cultural and political backgrounds than their predecessors" (Sjolie, 2002, p. 28). Rather than centering education on students'

needs, schools often test students “to see if they can meet the needs of instructors and administrators” (Sjolie, 2002, p. 29). Is this learning relevant to students? Needs assessments, which aid in the establishment of relevant goals, are “the first step in building flexible, adaptive, non-stagnant curriculum” (Sjolie, 2002, op. cit). Assessments grant students opportunities to articulate goals, knowledge, provide instructors with important personal information, dictate learning preferences, and more. It may take several classes for teachers to extract this information before applying it to program planning, yet the benefits are discernable. A mixed-level classroom that is modified to involve students and their interests greatly juxtaposes the previous patterned and drilled classrooms in which students responded to teacher stimulus and were only corrected on grammatical and phonological accuracy. Straying from the latter classroom model allows educators to aim to forge a risk-taking classroom which emphasizes spontaneous interaction, desire to communicate, guessing, trial and error, natural redundancy, and negotiated meaning (Sjolie, 2002, p. 31). Dialogues, discussion, and relevant study topics such as movies and restaurants keep students engaged. The community built in the classroom is the key to communication and it compels students. Soljie (2002) asserts that students derive motivation from this environment, “for they wish to remain a vital part of the group, to communicate fully in order to partake in what is going on in the class, the jokes as well as the serious curriculum” (p. 32). This is real language and real interaction.

Over a decade later, Bekiryazici approached the mixed level classroom by drawing out practical advice from Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s work. Bekiryazici focuses on Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD, arguing that peer tutoring and scaffolding are practical tools for mixed level classroom teachers. The ZPD is defined as the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what they can do in collaboration with adults or more capable peers. Bekiryazici (2015) asserts that many mixed level classroom teachers do not teach within the ZPD but instead prefer adjusting the level of the material to the upper-middle section, which leaves upper level students lacking and lower levels in a state of confusion (p. 913). Teachers are responsible for keeping tasks within the students’ ZPD. Rather than completing simple tasks, “children solve problems that they cannot do individually; and through collaboration...they develop their mental and cognitive skills” (Bekiryazici, 2015, p. 914). While

teaching within the ZPD, teachers can simplify the learner's role in the task, constantly check the learner's competence, scaffold, and adjust the nature of the assignment rather than the quantity (Bekiryazici, 2015, p.915). Gradually moving towards learner independence is a key factor of the ZPD. Thus, students oscillate between group and independent work as they develop their skills and become capable English speakers.

Within the mixed level classroom, conversation monopoly by upper level students is a familiar occurrence. In order to maximize participation, Carlson suggests idea sharing through the use of self-learning portfolios. In contrast to teacher selected vocabulary, students create their own lists from the text. Through repetition of this process students learn to filter important words and “naturally tend to select more high-frequency words over those that are rarely used” (Carlson, 2015, p. 202). In these portfolios, students create original sentences with their words, discuss them with classmates, and summarize paragraphs in one sentence. Carlson (2015) recognizes a plethora of benefits of this process, citing ownership of vocabulary usage, teaching the skill of skipping unimportant information, and self-motivation (p. 203-207). Students are explicitly taught skills for filtering information and upper-level students strengthen their material through the inclusion of facts. Different expectations are placed on different level students. Students are cycled through a process of individual work, group work, and class discussion. Carlson (2015) maintains that the ultimate objective of the portfolio is “to prepare all students to engage with the class” (p. 205).

A few years after Carlson's publication Su and Liang argued for cooperative learning and game-based teaching in their case study. This study follows twenty fifth and sixth graders during a 2014 summer English course in Taiwan in a mixed-level and mixed-age classroom. In this course, students who have had bilingual instruction beginning in kindergarten sit alongside students who are complete beginners in English. To bridge the severe gap between proficiency levels, educators turn to two distinct methods to unify and engage the divided group. Game-based teaching is the merging of games and teaching content while cooperative learning is pair or group work. (Su & Liang, 2017, p. 1978) Ensuring time for game-based activities and group work, the daily classroom sequence entails the following: roll

calls, songs, introductions, and games or activities. The repetition of this structure grants less-proficient students familiar processes upon which to build. This structure provides familiarity and comfort for students who may be overwhelmed by the content. Additionally, the repetition allows students space to develop skills. Group activities and games such as “Bingo”, “Guessing Games”, and “Easy Questions” ensure more-proficient students are not subject to attenuated activities suited for less-proficient students (Su & Liang, 2017, p. 1980). After applying this new format, Su and Liang compared student engagement from their 2014 summer course with previous summers. During the 2014 experiment, the researchers noted that despite varying proficiency levels, “students paid more attention” and were “more enthusiastic in answering questions during class” (Su & Liang, 2017, p. 1982). Students’ personal investment in lessons increased as they offered to play games repeatedly and could recall “at least three sentence patterns” (Su & Liang, 2017, p. 1982). Still, it is important to remember the reality of creating such a curriculum. Educators did not individually target each level in the lesson, but instead created one lesson to encompass every level. The process of preparing teaching materials and selecting suitable songs and books was time-consuming. When making preparations to include game-based teaching in a lesson, teachers “consider the languages first, then develop suitable (activities/games) to assist the language learning” (Su & Liang, 2017, p. 1983). Experienced teachers may be more comfortable to stray from traditional lessons and develop new games and activities. Despite the time commitment and divergence from traditional class structures, Su and Liang (2017) declare that this method serves each level of student as it takes out “...the pressure within learning environments to reduce their anxiety and gradually increase[s] their learning interest” (p. 1982).

Adding her voice to the conversation, Abbot highlights three frameworks that aid in the selection and adaptation of tasks in the mixed level classroom. She focuses on task-based language teaching which aims to engage learners in relevant, goal-oriented communication. The first framework belongs to Peter Skehan (1998) who “illustrates how code (lexical) complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress can be adjusted to accommodate diverse learner levels and needs”(Abbot, 2019, p. 2). Teachers of mixed level classrooms do not need to create separate lessons using different material, but rather include

supports and adjustments. Examples of adjustments include reducing the length of materials, increasing opportunities for clarification, and simplifying task complexity. To reduce cognitive complexity, or the degree of cognitive processing required, teachers can repeat material types, lessen the number of assignment steps, and provide clear, organized information (Abbot, 2019, p. 5). The second framework, belonging to Bill Bowler and Sue Parminter (2002), is a strategy of bias and tiered tasks. Bias tasks feature two complementary activities. More proficient students complete the more demanding activity, while less proficient students complete the simpler activity. Tiered tasks are activities with different levels of support and control. More proficient students have less support and greater freedom. Less proficient students have a controlled activity with more support. Both tasks are tied to the same lesson or activity.

The image of a wedding cake demonstrates the theory behind tiered tasks. The top tier of the cake is supported the most (by the other layers) and permits the least freedom of error (it is the smallest area of the cake). This task is the best for lower level students. The bottom tier has the least support and the most freedom to experiment (the largest area of the cake). Bottom tier tasks are for upper level students. In contrast to a wedding cake, bias tasks are exemplified by the image of a pie sliced unevenly in two. Upper level students with bigger academic appetites are assigned the bigger slice of the pie. Lower level students with smaller appetites are assigned the smaller piece of the pie. Just like the pie slices, the activities are complementary. Bowler and Parminter suggest that “task response demands can be simplified (i.e., bias tasks) or supports can be added (i.e., tiered tasks)... without the need to change the text” (Abbot, 2019, p. 9). Recommended classroom tasks include complementary activities, differing answer formats (i.e., matching versus multiple-choice), and pairing students of varying levels to check answers. (Abbot, 2019, p. 9-10). The third framework, grading and leveling the task and text, created by Tony Lynch (2009), offers listening text and learner adaptations. Lynch insists that the majority of teachers lack the time to modify materials. Thus, the clear answer to this conundrum is simplifying demands and adding supports. Examples of these supports include graphic organizers, a pre-listening discussion, cloze listening activities, and more (Abbot, 2019, p. 13). These three frameworks offer practical activities for mixed level classrooms.

Despite the differing subjects and purposes of the primary sources, there is an undeniable common ground. Many of the sources highlight the importance of working beyond the students' comfort level, cooperative learning, and a shared ultimate goal of gradual independence. Each source offers its own solution to the mixed level classroom issues through varying theories and practical activities.

Students should be pushed to work outside of tasks in which they are comfortable. Bekiryaici quite blatantly voices support for this idea citing Vygotsky's ZPD as evidence. Rather than a teacher being the only guide through the ZPD, more capable peers are illustrated as satisfactory and plentiful help in the mixed level classroom. Sjolie (2002) echoes this in his depiction of the classroom, noting that students have to "reach beyond their individual levels to communicate with one another" (p.31). Carlson repeats the importance of setting high expectations for students, pushing them to perform better and at a higher level. Regardless of Sjolie's message of reaching beyond one's individual level, his portrayal of language in the classroom is not universal for every context. Sjolie paints communication in the target language as the only means for communication in the mixed level classroom and uses this as a main motivator for students. The desire to communicate and be a part of something compels them. However, it is possible, especially but not exclusively in English as Foreign Language classes, that the students share a common language and can disregard the target language and communicate through other means as seen with the increasingly popular methods of translanguaging, trans-semiotizing, and plurilingualism which are making headway in academic circles and the daily lives of many (e.g. Cenoz & Gorter, 2013; de los Rios & Seltzer, 2017; Lin, 2015; Liu, 2020; Lotherington, 2013; Wei, 2018).

Along with working beyond one's individual level, cooperative learning is a recurring component of the mixed-level classroom. Carlson and Bekiryaici recommend pair and group work activities and a regular fluctuation from group to independent work. Meanwhile, Abbot recommends several cooperative learning activities such as dual-choice gap fill and complementary roles, yet she does not specify how often or in what sequence these group activities should be used. Game-based teaching could be considered cooperative learning as students work in groups and teams yet the authors do not specify the frequency nor the benefits of general group work.

Finally, multiple sources aim to gradually lead mixed level students away from reliance on peers and towards independence. To begin, Carlson highlights the importance of teaching skills for filtering information that will allow the students to independently select vocabulary relevant to them. The self-learning portfolios aim for students to identify what they themselves are struggling with, master vocabulary through questions with peers, and prepare to confidently share their opinion in a class discussion. The three frameworks presented by Abbot offer much practical advice for the classroom, such as lowering cognitive complexity by repeating task types. As students complete the same task in different contexts, the familiarity builds confidence within students and lessens the need for outside support. At last, in the ZPD “support is withdrawn gradually after the learner starts to internalize knowledge and work on his own” (Bekiryazici, 2015, p. 915).

Through my exploration of these sources, I noted the different frameworks and activities that can be applied to a mixed level classroom. Some sources advocated for meticulously curating materials and information about the students that could be carefully included in the lessons, while others suggested retaining the same material but adding supports or varied student roles. Still, the importance of working beyond the students’ comfort level, cooperative learning, and a shared ultimate goal of gradual independence was apparent throughout my research. Now that select frameworks have been endorsed for the mixed level classroom, it is critically important that these ideas be further developed on an extensive scale with the ultimate goal of implementation in schools across different countries and contexts.

Framework

Backwards Design

Goal-setting and investment are noted as great motivators for students in mixed level classrooms (e.g. Sjolie, 2002). How does a teacher encourage a student to become engaged in their education? How can teachers choose material or projects in which students are interested? Instead of spending hours brainstorming, or designing a curriculum and hoping that students are interested, go directly to the source:

the students. What do students want to accomplish? Backwards design underscores the importance of the student voice and centers the curriculum design process around student goals.

Backwards design is a technique that many teachers employ to set goals or incorporate their students' goals into the curriculum (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The first step is setting student learning goals. Goals can be identified through private conversation, group discussion, questionnaires, or other activities. Secondly, a way of measuring these goals is determined. What assessment, assignment, task, etc. will demonstrate the students' goal accomplishment? Finally, the class curriculum is developed. The teacher identifies what the students and teacher will do in everyday class. This process allows teachers to "ensure big ideas communicated in content standards are not overlooked" (Davis & Autin p. 58) and compels them to "set targets, collect evidence, and plan meaningful instruction to help students achieve learning goals" (Davis & Autin p. 58). Backwards design is suited to standard-based environments where teachers are targeting specific student goals. Moreover, this flipped structure underscores several academic theories. For example, the second language acquisition theory emergentism argues that "grammatical rules and other formal aspects of language 'emerge' (that is, are constructed and abstracted) from language use and experience, rather than being innate, or learned as abstract structures" (Mitchell et. al, 2013, p. 99). Similarly, the "I, Thou, It" framework depicts a triangle as an exemplification of a three part relationship between teachers (I), students (thou), and content (it) (Hawkins, 1974, p. 49). To the same degree backwards design drives both the teacher and student towards clarity and growth, the content in "I, Thou, It" propels both parties to uncover and develop skills. The final objective or the content is a medium for the students and teachers to develop skills through usage and experience, rather than direct instruction.

The following excerpt from Davis and Autin (2020) outlines the stages of backwards design in depth:

Stage 1: Identify desired results. This requires identifying what students should know, understand, and be able to do it. What essential knowledge should be clarified and understood by all students? What are the learning goals? Clarity for teachers and students is essential in stage one.

Stage 2: Determine acceptable evidence. This requires considering in advance the assessment evidence

needed to confirm that the objectives or goals have been met. That is, how will we know that the student knows? During this stage, assessment options are explored, with an emphasis on assessment for learning and gaining mastery of important content. Assessment for learning helps the student demonstrate content knowledge which comes later in the learning cycle.

Stage 3: Plan instructional activities and instruction. What formative strategies, activities, and resources will be used to help students meet the learning goals? How will these resources provide evidence that students are making progress? The intent of this stage is to engage learners in meaningful learning as they move ahead keeping the end in mind (Davis & Autin p. 58).

Traditionally backwards design is suggested for standard-based environments where teachers target specific student goals. If setting individual student goals in a classroom is achievable, teachers can lead each student towards goals that are challenging but attainable. If one-on-one goal-setting is not within reach, backwards design still lends itself to the mixed level classroom where goals can be group-focused or level-focused rather than classroom-focused. When teaching a class with diverse students, their needs and goals provide teachers with clear endpoints and desired results.

Differentiated Instruction

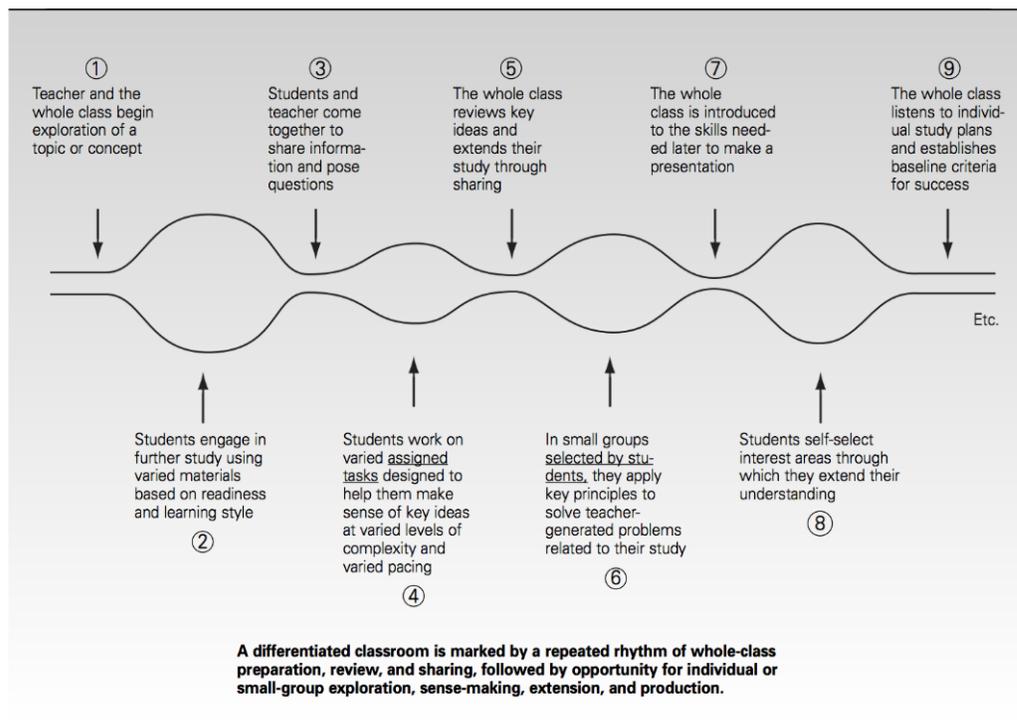
Through an investigation of the mixed level classroom, one of the most popular approaches is differentiated instruction (e.g. Davis and Autin, 2020; Aftab, Jaweria, 2015). Differentiated instruction is a framework in which teachers present major ideas to all students, “but the levels of teacher support, task complexity, pacing and avenues to learning are varied in response to individual student readiness, interest and learning profile” (Affholder, 2003, p. 6). Differentiated instruction recognizes that students of different learning backgrounds, native languages, social ability, and academic ability compose the contemporary classroom. Rather than conveying one level or depth of instruction, teachers should modify teaching materials, processes, and products to better reach each student. Carol Anne Tomlinson, a respected scholar on the subject of differentiated instruction, defines a differentiated classroom as a space

that “provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 1). Characteristics of a differentiated classroom include flexible grouping, purposeful student movement, some purposeful student talking, assessments, proactive planning, and multiple approaches. Tomlinson compares the differentiated classroom to a one-room schoolhouse. The teacher rotates their focus “from the whole class, to small groups, to individuals” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 2-3). This rotation cycles throughout the entire class.

Figure 1 below exemplifies a teacher’s movement in a differentiated classroom. The chart demonstrates a clear pattern of oscillation between activities with and without a teacher. Independent activities such as studying, assigned tasks, and small groups allow students to work at their own pace and with material suited for their level. Collective activities such as presentation of new material, posing questions, and sharing ideas permit students to benefit from collaborative learning.

Figure 1

The Flow of Instruction in a Differentiated Classroom



Note. Figure 1 from Tomlinson's (2001) book (p.6)

Differentiated Instruction in the real world. Within any discussion of differentiated instruction, the practicality and reality of the situation must be mentioned. For many, differentiated instruction is an ideal or goal, rather than a feasible achievement. It provides a model to aspire towards with principles that guide teachers rather than a step-by-step model to meticulously follow. In 2015, independent researcher Jaweria Aftab conducted a study to collect the beliefs and perceptions of 120 middle school teachers in Karachi, Pakistan on the topic of differentiated instruction. When analyzing responses from the questionnaire, Aftab noted "95% of the teachers were willing to implement differentiated instructions; however 40.8% of the teachers implemented differentiated instructions" (Aftab, 2015, p. 106). Where is the disconnect? If survey participants affirm their beliefs that this method will encourage active participation, enhance learning interest, increase academic success and participation, and meet the needs of different learners, why is differentiated instruction not implemented by every teacher? (Aftab 2015).

The most prominent reason for the gap between support of differentiated instruction and implementation is time limitation. Differentiated instruction is a multifaceted approach that requires educators to recognize the respective skill sets of individual learners and include activities customized for them. For example, in the sample lesson in Figure 1, step two features learners working with materials that the teacher selected for them based on their readiness and learning style, step four includes assigned tasks that have varied levels of complexity and pacing, and step six incorporates teacher-generated problems that are appropriate for each group. Assessing individual students' skills and generating individual and group activities suited towards learners' capabilities and preferences for this classroom alone calls for a significant block of time. Moreover, the curriculum is expected to meet state and national standards which concede little flexibility for divergence. Still, that is only one class. Teachers are often expected to teach a week of lessons to several different classes. In Aftab's study of middle school teachers, despite teacher's beliefs about differentiated instruction and the desires of stakeholders "teachers were found to be short of planning and instructional time for differentiation" (Aftab, 2015, p. 95). In a

2020 study on Turkish students' and teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction, one teacher remarked "...I cannot help thinking how I could deal with [differentiated instruction] if it were required by the school, because it took all weekend to prepare for one class" (Yavuz, 2020, p. 327). The differentiated classroom calls for balancing state standards, tiered activities, flexible grouping, student choices, and time management. Is differentiated instruction feasible for the average teacher?

While differentiated instruction is not realistic for every teacher, research suggests there is a type of teacher and teaching environment that is better suited for this method. A 2003 study by Linda Affholder indicates that teachers with curriculum familiarity, teaching experience, willingness, and extensive training employ the most differentiated instruction strategies in the classroom. As a teacher's comfort level in their classroom and curriculum increases, so does their opportunity for experimentation and introducing varied instruction. Producing a classroom with differentiated instruction is not an overnight change. Bit by bit, the modification and creation of different activities allows teachers to experiment and analyze the efficacy and functionalism of each strategy. All the same, the school and teaching culture plays a part in the implementation of this instruction style. Sufficient time for training and classroom preparation assists teachers in tailoring their classroom. Integrating differentiated instruction strategies in the classroom demands practice, support, and time.

Tomlinson herself (2001) notes the improbability of an educator instinctively knowing how to teach a classroom with learners of mixed levels. The skill needed to lead a differentiated classroom is not intrinsic, but rather a "learned skill, in the same sense of any other art or craft" (Tomlinson, 2001, p.17). Each experience with varied learning backgrounds, classroom management, and mixed level students enhances an educator's skills and prepares them for the task of effectively teaching this type of classroom.

When teachers are comfortable with differentiation, Tomlinson notes they often naturally develop the following skills:

- focusing curriculum on essential information, understanding and skills
- giving students a voice
- looking beyond actions,

- scrounging for a wide range of materials
- thinking of multiple ways to accomplish a common goal
- diagnosing student need and constructing learning experiences in response
- structuring student work to avoid potential problems
- sharing teaching responsibility with students
- moving students among varied work arrangements to see students in new roles and to help them see themselves
- tracking student growth towards personal and group benchmarks
- teaching for success
- building a sense of community (Tomlinson, 2001, p 17)

Process Learning

Process learning is a framework that proposes learners do not need an explicit goal to improve or accomplish something. Advancement derives from the process itself rather than the final product. The best pastry chefs are not those who aim to win contests or create the perfect wedding cake. Instead, those who demonstrate mastery experiment with baking regularly and are comfortable making mistakes.

Process learning is best exemplified from a parable from David Bayles and Ted Orland's book *Art and*

Fear:

[A] ceramics teacher announced on opening day that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the *quantity* of work they produced, all those on the right solely on its *quality*. His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the "quantity" group: fifty pound of pots rated an "A", forty pounds a "B", and so on. Those being graded on "quality", however, needed to produce only one pot — albeit a perfect one — to get an "A". Well, came grading time and a curious fact emerged: the works of highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the "quantity" group was busily churning out piles of work – and learning from their mistakes — the "quality" group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay." (Bayles & Orland, 1993, p. 29)

This experiment has been repeated in a variety of art, photography, and pottery classes. The pressure and fear associated with creating one perfect product can paralyze someone. Frequency and familiarity in a process can build confidence and allow the creator to take more risks and embrace imperfection. The idea of a perfect product is limiting. Once achieved, what incentive is there to

continue? On the other hand, people can find motivation through the simple act of creating. Each mistake and accomplishment motivates the creator to take their work in a different direction.

This process can be applied to a mixed level classroom. Presenting an unfamiliar final project without practice or process familiarity can be overwhelming for students. For example, if students are required to submit a ten page literature review as a final project, the teacher could assign two four-page literature reviews earlier in the semester. Familiarity with the process will build confidence and allow students to learn from their mistakes. Additionally, students can compare their final work to their own past literature reviews, instead of an ideal or the work of more proficient students. Repetition of a process builds skill and conviction.

Activities

Formative Assessment

Although many educators may not be familiar with the name, formative assessments are an essential component of numerous classrooms. Imagine a new student joining a fifth grade English classroom. The teacher asks the student to introduce himself or herself to the class. The student confidently speaks in front of the class and remains sociable with classmates. Later on, when students work individually on summarizing an excerpt in writing, the new student looks frustrated. From these observations, the teacher may surmise that this student will enjoy working in a group context or teaching a concept to fellow students. Additionally, writing or summarizing may be challenging areas for them. These observations are part of formative assessment. Through everyday interaction and observation, teachers are able gauge where students may struggle or succeed. These assessments are often informal, teacher made, provided during instruction, and ongoing (Davis and Autin p. 60).

Questionnaires handed out before units or in the beginning of the school year are also classified as formative assessments. Information gathered from assessments such as questionnaires and teacher observations lead educators to conclusions. Using these new conclusions as input, instructional adjustments can be made to suit students' preferences, interests, learning style, and more. Following

information gathering and assessments, a teacher provides feedback to the student. For example, the teacher can approach the student and help them underline important information or introduce strategies to find the main idea of the passage. This feedback is an important part of the process. It opens up a two-way street. The teacher observes the student's performance and uses this information to suggest strategies and tools that may help. The student applies these new strategies and shares the results with the teacher. The process begins again with the student inching closer to mastery at the end of each cycle.

Figure 2

Sample Class Questionnaire

Listed below are some topics we will discuss during the cultural units of our Spanish class. Please number them from 1 to 5. 1 is your favorite and 5 is your least favorite.

- _____ music
- _____ art
- _____ holidays
- _____ food
- _____ daily life

How do you learn? What do you want to learn? Please answer these questions by circling "yes" or "no" or filling in the blank.

- | | | |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. I enjoy working in a group. | Yes | No |
| 2. I ask for help when I need it. | Yes | No |
| 3. I motivate myself. | Yes | No |
| 4. I enjoy working by myself. | Yes | No |
| 5. I learn by writing down what is said. | Yes | No |
| 6. I enjoy following directions. | Yes | No |
| 7. I enjoy making my own directions. | Yes | No |
| 8. My goal for this class is _____. | | |
| 9. The skill I want to improve the most is _____. | | |
| 10. One of my biggest challenges is _____. | | |
| 11. One of my biggest successes is _____. | | |
| 12. I want my teacher to know _____. | | |

Self-Assessment

Although formative assessment is an advantageous tool in the classroom, it is not the only form of assessment that benefits students. Self-assessment is a substantial instrument in the mixed-level classroom

(Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Kanazawa, 2020). Feedback is a positive force in the classroom. However, the shortage of feedback in the average classroom often derives from the sizable student to teacher ratio. In larger classrooms, regular individual student feedback is unrealistic for most. Even so, some of the benefits of feedback can be obtained through student self-assessment.

Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) name three steps in the self-assessment process; (1) articulation of expectations, (2) self-assessment, (3) revision. In the first step, educators, students, or both must clearly state expectations. To help define what they are looking for, students can co-create a rubric and reference anchor papers to clarify the different levels of the rubric. In the second step, students create rough drafts and compare them to the set expectations. Students can create a checklist or annotate their work to mark that each standard has been met. Finally, students' feedback from their self-assessment directs revision. Self-assessment format and difficulty can be altered depending on the context. Younger students or students with little oral proficiency can use emojis or cards corresponding to a stop light to indicate their comfort level or execution.

Tiered Tasks

Bowler and Parminter (2002) utilize the image of a wedding cake to explain the levels of support and freedom in tiered tasks. On a wedding cake, the higher tier features more support and less freedom or spaces. The lower tier features less support and more freedom or space. Tiered tasks follow this model. Higher tiered tasks are designated for students who need more support and less latitude. Lower tier tasks are designated for more proficient students who do not require as much support and are comfortable with less restrictions.

Figure Three

Example of Tiered Activity

Top Tier

Task A: For Less Proficient Students

1. Where did the fisherman go after the storm?
2. Which animals are native to the South African coast?
3. How long is the coastline?
4. What effects does pollution have on the coast?

Answers

- a. 3,000 km.
- b. Illness, damaged coastal economies, lost biodiversity, and algal blooms.
- c. Brown fur seals, coelacanths, and guitarfish.
- d. Back to sea.

Middle Tier**Task B: For Mid Level Students**

1. Where did the fisherman go after the storm?
 - a. Back to sea
 - b. To their homes
 - c. East to Port Elizabeth
2. Which animals are native to the South African coast?
 - a. Brown fur seals
 - b. Coelacanths
 - c. Guitarfish
3. How long is the coastline?
 - a. 3,000 km
 - b. Less than 3,000 km
 - c. 2,500 km
4. What effects does pollution have on the coast?
 - a. Water salinity change, increased tourism, and coral extinction.
 - b. Erosion, snail mutation, and increased water acidity.
 - c. Illness, damaged coastal economies, lost biodiversity, and algal blooms.

Bottom Tier**Task C: For Advanced Students**

1. Where did the fisherman go after the storm?
2. Which animals are native to the South African coast?
3. How long is the coastline?
4. What effects does pollution have on the coast?

Task A supplies all the answers as support. Less proficient, or higher tier, students use recall and the process of elimination to match the correct answers. Task B offers multiple-choice answers for the mid level student. The difficulty of the multiple-choice question format can be modified. For example, the

second question has multiple correct answers. Task C, a lower level activity, offers the least support for more proficient students. The same activity is modified for different comprehension and skill levels.

Despite the multiple tiers, there is a unified lesson.

Figure Four

Secondary Example of Tiered Activity

Tiered tasks can split the classroom into two groups on occasion, rather than invariably resorting to three groups consisting of less proficient, midlevel, and advanced students. Mixing student grouping encourages cooperative learning, teaching to other students, and working beyond one’s comfort level.

Dual choice gapfill is another tiered task that Bowler and Parminter (2002) cite as an effective activity in the mixed level classroom (61-62).

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Dual Choice Gapfill</p> <p>Franciszek ..(a).. Coel Laboratories. Maria demonstrates that tomato propagation is possible with (b). They travel by ..(c)... to the city center. The ...(d)... is located next to the Vistula River.</p> | <p>Missing Words</p> <p>a) directs / manages b) true leaves / suckers c) bus / tram d) castle / citadel</p> |
|--|--|

The above activity exemplifies one activity that caters to both higher tier and lower tier students. The higher tier, or less proficient, group receives the activity with both columns. The missing word section provides extra support and allows students to choose answers from a select listing. To challenge the more advanced group, the right side with the missing words list is not provided to more proficient students. The more advanced students have less support and must recall the required vocabulary word or an appropriate match. This tiered task allows students to work on separate levels, yet still allows them to coalesce to review the answers.

Bias Tasks

The image of an unevenly sliced pie illustrates the principles behind bias tasks in Bowler and Parminter's work. Both activities, or slices, are complementary, with the larger slice going to higher level students with bigger appetites and the smaller slice going for lower level students with smaller appetites.

Figure Five

Example of Bias Task

Task A: For Less Proficient Students

1. How many people have pets?
2. Who meditates?
3. Whose favorite team is Bayern Munich?
4. Who listens to Frank Sinatra?
5. Who loves mushrooms?

Task B: For More Proficient Students

Write questions for these answers, based on the reading.

1. How many people have pets? *Three people have pets.*
2.? *Kerry does.*
3.? *Tom.*
4.? *Jimmy does.*
5.? *Ewa.*

In Task A, less proficient students answer questions about the reading. In Task B, more proficient students formulate questions based on the provided answers. As this task is complementary, student pair review offers students more opportunities to actively participate and collaborate. It also features a power dynamic flip. This activity sets up less proficient students with key information that more proficient students are vying to reconstruct. Bowler and Partminter (2002) note that knowledge of this key information is a positive experience for less proficient students who often experience whole-class oral feedback, which often reshapes into “ a dialogue between the teacher and the brightest and most forthcoming students, while the weaker students feel left out” (63).

Example 2. A jigsawed gapfill is another example of bias tasks (Bowler & Parminter, 2002, p.63). For example, the teacher can make two copies of the Gettysburg Address. Copy A has six words

redacted or removed with correction fluid. Copy B has twelve words removed. Less proficient students complete Copy A while more proficient students complete Copy B. The number of gaps as well as the complexity of the chosen words can be altered to modify the task difficulty. The missing words can be reviewed in the two respective groups or as a whole-class activity. In both tiered tasks and bias tasks, all students work on the same activity, thus the activities can be reviewed and discussed in student pairs or as a class.

Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are online forums in which participants communicate asynchronously. These platforms benefit mixed level students in a variety of ways. Online, students who are hesitant to speak during class do not face traditional pressures such as time limitations, pronunciation uncertainty, or conversation monopoly. Removing the real-time nature of in-class discussions allows students to discreetly research any unknown vocabulary or concepts, therefore placing students on a more equal field. Less proficient students are given the opportunity to contribute and voice their opinions on different terms while more proficient students have the opportunity to more fully develop their ideas.

Of course, it is essential to note that students should have allotted classroom time, or afterschool time, as well as basic digital literacy skills in order to access online discussion boards. Access to the internet and technology is not universal, hence teachers should examine their students' situations when considering the inclusion of online discussion boards in curriculum.

Orbital Studies

Orbital studies are independent studies designed by students that are based on a teacher's criteria. In contrast with traditional independent studies which may replace the classroom content, orbital studies are extensions of curriculum topics. With a teacher's approval, students select a topic and a procedure to investigate the topic. The teacher should recognize where the student is in the learning process and push them forward towards more challenging content.

Table One

Example of Orbital Study Handout and Rubric

Orbital Study

A. Please select from the following choices. The total should be 5.

| | | |
|-------------|---------------------------|---------|
| 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Slideshow | Two Social Media Profiles | Podcast |
| Short story | Video | Debate |

*Students may also propose their own ideas to be approved by the teacher

B. Product Proposal

Please briefly give an overview of your project:

Why did you choose this project?

What do you need from me to be successful?

C. Work Log

| Date | Goal | Today I Accomplished | Next Step |
|------|------|----------------------|-----------|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

D. Mary Alice loves the Olympics. She has decided to research five countries that are competing in the Winter Olympics to extend her learning of geography and culture. She has decided to present her findings in a podcast episode and create a cheat sheet for her classroom with the podcast outline. Students will listen to her podcast and discuss it at the end of class.

E. Sample Podcast Rubric

| Below Standard | Approaching Standard | Meets Standard |
|--|--|--|
| Some information is accurate. The purpose may be hard to define. | The information is accurate and presented clearly. | Accurate information is presented in an engaging manner. |
| The organization is difficult to | The information is organized | The podcast has a clear |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| understand. | semi-logically and most points are understood without further explanation. | purpose and the information is organized logically. |
| The geography of three or fewer countries is presented. | The geography of four countries is presented. | The geography of five countries is presented. |
| The cultures of three or fewer countries are presented. | The cultures of four countries are presented. | The cultures of five countries are presented. |
| There are greater than five grammar mistakes. | There are one to five grammar mistakes. | Correct grammar is used in the presentation. |

In this example, the classroom is studying geography and culture. The teacher provides sample studies for students to expand their learning as seen in section A. To encourage students to work on projects they find interesting, students are given different options and even allowed to propose a new format to the teacher. Once a student has selected their project type, they must fill out the project proposal form from section B. The project proposal form provides teachers with an opportunity to gauge the student's approach and encourage them to work with slightly challenging content. After the proposal has been approved, the student is given a work log and reviews the rubric for their project with a teacher. It is important that the student is provided a clear model that meets the standards of the rubric. The work log can be used by the student to track progress and provide structure. Furthermore, it can be used by the teacher to check in regularly with the student and push them forward. The goal is to meet the student where they are and push them towards more challenging content.

The benefits of orbital studies include flexibility, increased engagement due to feelings of ownership, and work that students can devote extra time to if they finish other tasks early. One downside of orbital studies is that the work is often done at home. To avoid this, teachers can allot classroom time to independent work on orbital studies and discuss progress and direction with the students.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a teaching technique that is named after the temporary structures that support workers during the construction of buildings. Originally, scaffolding was defined as a “process that

enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his [sic] unassisted efforts” (Wood et al., 1976, p. 90). More recently, some have argued to expand the definition to include self-, peer-, and expert scaffolding as learners rely on their own metacognition and shared cognition (Diaz Maggiolo, 2013).

Both in the classroom and during the construction process, scaffolding involves creating temporary supports that are adjustable and gradually removed as the building nears completion. Similarly, students should depend less on scaffolding activities as they near comprehension and proficiency in a subject. The level of support depends on student need. The learning outcome is not simplified, but rather supported with different activities. As scaffolding is a broad concept, many activities applied in the classroom are considered scaffolding. Some examples of such activities include in-class discussion, partner work, including pictures and diagrams in class, cue cards, prompting, and more. The following activities are examples of scaffolding.

Think-Pair-Share

First, work individually on this question (1). Then, work with your assigned partner and share your ideas (2).

The Kentucky Pack Horse program was implemented by the Works Progress Administration. How did this program affect economic mobility and literacy?

1. Brainstorming:
2. Pair:

This activity is a variation of in-class discussion. It should be a regular occurrence in the class routine that is gradually phased out. When introducing this think-pair-share activity, the teacher begins with a simple example and slowly increases complexity. In this example of collaborative learning, students work independently before sharing ideas with a peer. The student writes down any thoughts or conclusions under the brainstorming section and repeats the same step after collaborating with a pair for the second half of the activity. Moreover, teachers can expand the “share” to the entire classroom. This

exercise demonstrates the importance of focus and individual work. Students are incentivized to formulate their own conclusions before joining their partner. What makes this activity scaffolding? This activity integrates time to process and talk through content. Peer discussion allows students to talk over the topic with others engaging in the same content. The important skills of reflecting on the material, peer discussion, and collaborative learning are emphasized through this activity. As students develop these skills, the think-pair-share activities are gradually phased out of the class routine.

Verbal Rehearsal (example of teacher's prompts to students)

- Look at this sentence, because “octopus” starts with the letter ‘o’, we should use ‘an’ with “octopus”.
- Monica, what should we use before “octopus”: ‘a’ or ‘an’?
- Dragos, when should we use ‘an’?
- Gabi, does Monica think we should use ‘a’ or ‘an’?
- Jessica, what should we use before the word “dolphin”?

Verbal rehearsal is an example of scaffolding that allows teachers to modify the amount of guidance and support offered. To the same degree “I, Thou, It” demonstrates the tripartite relationship between teacher, student, and content, this exercise illustrates that scaffolding can occur in each part of the triangle. Before the teacher solicits answers from any students, it is crucial that models and pre-skills have been taught. In this case, the students should already know vowels and the rule for determining the correct indefinite article. Perhaps the class has already reviewed several examples on the board as a group. Select students may need to practice an isolated portion of the strategy. For example, Dragos is prompted to explain the reasoning for using the indefinite article ‘an’. On the other hand, Jessica is asked to apply the entire strategy to a new word. The teacher individualizes the questions and ensures that each student is challenged appropriately. As students become more familiarized with the strategy, the teacher can lessen the prompts. The goal of scaffolding is student independence. When removing scaffolding, there is a transition from the teacher verbalizing each step, to the student verbalizing each step, to the student performing without verbalization.

Double Entry Journal

The double entry journal is a two column journal that provides students with space to respond to what they read or hear. As each student decides what to put in each column, this activity can be individualized to any type or level of student. Less proficient students may use the journal to record an unfamiliar word in the left column and the definition in the right. More proficient students may use the journal to make predictions or extract common themes from quotes. This activity can be used with audio recordings and text. If using a double entry journal with an audio recording, it may be beneficial for students to listen to the audio initially before completing the activity with a transcript.

To create a double entry journal, students fold a piece of paper in half or draw a line vertically to bisect the page into two columns. The teacher presents models of a double entry journal and notes any additional directions. Then, the class reads or listens to a specific segment of the text. The left side is used to record the page number along with a word, excerpt, or idea from a section that was meaningful to the student. The right side is used to react to the quotes and ideas from the left. Reactions may include comments, questions, analysis, theories, opinions, synonyms, and more. At the end of this activity, students may share their responses with the class.

Table Two

Double Entry Journal Outline

| Left Side Options: The Source | Right Side Options: The Response |
|---|--|
| Observations, notes from the text, headings, facts, key words and phrases, concepts, author's predictions, facts, details, statements | Summaries, drawings, questions, hypotheses, theories, observations, definitions, explanations, options |

Note. This table demonstrates the diversity of options students can use to complete a double entry journal.

Table Three

Double Entry Journal Sample

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| P. 26 "Bearing" | Definition: a person's way of standing or moving |
|-----------------|--|

| | |
|---|--|
| P. 26 “We continue past his poultry supplier... sharing a shingle with another farmer” | Maybe this means they share a building or a sign? |
| P. 28 “Generally the best chefs go abroad... We haven’t matured enough as a food culture to keep them here” | There is not enough variety in what Irish people and tourists want to eat to satisfy a trained chef who likes variety and cooking different cuisine. |

Note. The left side of the table is the source and the right side is the student’s response. The double entry journal source is taken from the article *The Pluck of the Irish* Jay Cheshes.

The sample double entry journal shows that the student used the activity to define unknown words, hypothesize the meaning of a phrase, and rephrase for comprehension. Double entry journals benefit students’ collaborative learning, engagement with the text, vocabulary, learning autonomy, comprehension, and content retention.

Literature Circle

A literature circle is an adaptable, recurring activity that provides students with different methods to approach a text. It is similar to a jigsaw activity in the sense that each student specializes in a specific area during each session. Before organizing the first session, the teacher should model the different roles to familiarize them. Below are examples of different literature circle roles that can be assigned.

Table Four

Sample Literature Circle Roles: Version A

| Connector | Passage Provider | Plot Twister | Question Master | Counselor | Journalist | Predictor |
|--|--|--|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Write down five connections that were made while reading | Read one to two paragraphs that were interesting and explain why | Write down what you would change from the plot and why | Write five questions about the text. | Give three pieces of advice to a character. | Write a journal entry from the perspective of any character | Make at least four predictions for the next section and explain why |

Table Five

Sample Literature Circle Roles: Version B

| Quotemaster | Discussion Leader | Question Keeper | Task Manager |
|--|--|---|--|
| <p>-Find quotes from the text to support ideas from the discussion</p> <p>-Analyze and verify quotes and text support that the group mentions. Was the quote taken out of context? Can the text be interpreted in another way?</p> | <p>-Begin the discussion</p> <p>-If there is a specific theme or focus for the session, keep the others centralized on this task</p> <p>-Ensure that each group member has spoken and encourage those who have not spoken.</p> | <p>-Record all of the group's questions</p> <p>-Organize alike questions into categories</p> <p>-After reviewing the session's questions, extend the discussion by proposing at least one question to the group</p> | <p>-Review the roles at the beginning of the discussion</p> <p>-Keep group on task and be mindful of the time</p> <p>-Confirm each student's role for the next session</p> |

Literature Circle Procedure:

1. Students choose a book or project from several choices.
2. Students who choose the same book are placed in a small group together.
3. The first literature circle meeting takes place
 - a. Students decide how much text should be read for each session.
 - b. Students are given a sheet that lists all of the roles and features examples.
 - c. Students assign roles for the next meeting. Roles are rotated every session.
4. Subsequent Sessions
 - a. Students gather in small groups to discuss different elements of the text such as characters, themes, and vocabulary depending on their assigned roles.
 - b. Each student is expected to speak and participate.
 - c. The group confirms the new roles for the next session.
 - d. This cycle is continued until the text is finished.
5. Reflection
 - a. Students write reflections about the literature circle. This can be done following each session or after the group has finished the book or text completely. Depending on the student's age and ability, the format and length of reflections will differ.

Literature circles service mixed level students in many ways. To begin, students engage with material that they find interesting. Students choose their book and decide what is worth discussion. Additionally, this activity promotes self-direction and accountability. Once the first session has concluded, students themselves lead the literature circles with little teacher intervention. As groups are formed by book choice rather than student ability, students are more likely to collaborate with different students and come in contact with higher-order thinking. Instead of memorizing facts or what one is told, students who

take part in higher order thinking critically think, infer, and think creatively. In a discussion with mixed level students, students of all levels are exposed to higher level thinking and pushed to elevate their thoughts during group discussion. In addition to exposure to different students and thinking, students cycle through different modes of actively reading. For example, one week a student may be tasked with creating a visual depiction of something in the text and the next week they may be in charge of summarizing the reading.

The adaptable nature of literature circles also benefits teachers. The literature circle format can be used to discuss a primary text, a short film, or even a chapter in a science textbook. Roles can be added, subtracted, and altered depending on class size, subject, and complexity. Literature circles can be integrated into the curriculum in a variety of ways. Weekly sessions can be supplemented with individual written reflection or culminate in an individual or group project. Altogether, literature circles offer students multiple ways to engage with the text and their peers.

Tools

Self-direction

1. Weekly logs to track student goals and work
2. Journals to free write or write summaries
3. Illustrated Encyclopedia
4. Digital dictionaries
5. Student-made flashcards (physical or virtual)
6. Visual tools such as posters that provide cues or remind students of different processes
7. Individualized feedback from teacher

Collaboration

8. Designated time to share feedback with peers

Media

9. Gapfills with songs from Youtube
10. Ted Talks
11. Popular media (television and movies)

Authentic Materials/Tasks

12. Exposure to native speakers
13. Recording oneself talking for small increments of time (2 minutes, 5 minutes)

Conclusion

Despite the challenges of the mixed level classroom, the diversity of learning styles, skills, and backgrounds is a great benefit. Students learn to interact and collaborate with peers who possess different strengths and viewpoints. High standards are applied to the class as a whole, pushing students outside of their comfort zones while maintaining the comfort and safety of level-appropriate material.

After reviewing publications regarding mixed level classrooms and compiling various frameworks and activities, this process has brought me to several conclusions. One is the importance of method and material variation. For teachers to best reach different learners, unyielding obedience to specific methods or resources does not provide learners with variety. This variation goes hand in hand with flexible groupings. Precisely like real world communication, students will come into contact with individuals who are more or less proficient than themselves. Exposure and interaction with these different types of proficiencies pushes less proficient individuals towards higher-level thinking and requires more proficient individuals to be able to simplify and summarize complex thoughts and processes. Finally, to create an environment where mixed-level students can complement and support each other, I believe group mentality and motivation must be taken into account. If the class does not support student goals and is viewed as a required credit to pass or an obstacle to overcome, students will not be motivated.

With all that said, cultivating this environment is not instantly feasible for all educators in their current contexts. Many teachers can feasibly implement flexible grouping or some material variation, but implementing large-scale change is ambitious, especially considering the restraints of time, state and national standards, as well as administration demands. To reach diverse students, the teaching must be diversified. Teachers should be exposed to new ideas. It is important to have professional development to train teachers with new methods and techniques. The school and administration must provide a supportive environment that encourages teachers to experiment, differentiate, and variate from the norm. Hopefully, experimentation continues in the mixed level classroom as educators move towards a classroom that is engaging and relevant to all students.

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