

Student-Centered Activities in Mixed-Level Classes

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Due to a variety of constraints, many language teachers face the challenge of teaching groups of learners who possess considerably different second language abilities, have varied learning styles and preferences, and who possess different goals and objectives. Under the common teacher-centered or *one-book-fits-all* approach, where the teacher is forced to aim for the *middle* level, many students at the top or bottom end of the linguistic scale are left dissatisfied and demotivated. This paper outlines a more student-centered and differentiated approach, along with various activities, that provide a more level-appropriate, inclusive, and motivating learning experience for all students in the same class, regardless of level.

中・大規模な語学クラスの多くは、習熟度や学習理由の異なる学習者が混ざっていることが多く、伝統的な教師中心の教授法では、適切なレベルの教育を保証することは難しい。その結果、学習者は不満を抱き、モチベーションも減退する。この問題に取り組むため、本稿では、より学習者中心のアプローチと、授業で使えるアクティビティを紹介する。

Current Situation

Mixed Abilities and the One-Book-Fits-All Approach

In most language courses students are streamed, “divided into classes based on the assessment of their general ability” (Harlen & Malcolm, 1997), and most courses then adopt a one-book-fits-all approach to language teaching. Although some institutions do use quite effective language level assessment methods that focus on the skills contained within the specific courses, in many institutions, due to a number of constraints such as cost, time, staffing levels, and availability of classrooms and materials, students are grouped into sets or levels based on their performance on standardized tests such as TOEIC or TOEFL. However, as many courses are not based around the same skills which are tested by the standardized tests, the level at which the students are placed often does not accurately match their abilities with regard to skills focus of the course. For example, TOEIC test scores are often used to stream students into oral communication or writing classes, neither of which skill is included in the test. The fact that student’s levels vary considerably in many foreign language courses, which causes many problems for both teachers and students, has been noted by many authors including DelliCarpini (2006), Childs (2002), and Prodromou (1989). However, as mentioned above, once students are streamed into a particular class, they are viewed as being at much the same



linguistic level in their foreign language, and a one-book-fits-all approach is often then adopted in the classroom where all students are required to work at the same pace from the same textbook, study the same vocabulary items, read or listen to texts at the same level, and carry out communicative activities of the same difficulty. According to authors such as Harris and Snow (2004), Bremmer (2008), and Bowler and Parminter (2005), this one-level, teacher-centered approach, rather than being based on principles such as providing comprehensible input, using a variety of teaching methods and materials, and providing interesting and challenging tasks to complete cooperatively in a student-focused environment, has traditionally been seen as the best or only way to deal with medium to large groups of second language learners.

Problems

In addition to containing students at multiple linguistic levels, even in an EFL context such as Japan, many courses, especially with medium to large classes, contain students with very different learning styles, strengths and weaknesses, who develop at different rates and who have different preferences for learning. Therefore, as noted by many authors including Bremmer (2008) and Ur (1991), no one book, set of materials, or pace will ever be fully suitable for every student in the class. Learning styles and preferences, as well as vocabulary knowledge and reading, speaking, listening, and writing abilities can vary greatly within one class. This can often be seen in the varying standardized test scores of students placed in the same class or course. Again, due to specific constraints of the institution involved, this variation in levels can be quite staggering at times. Personally, I have taught classes streamed using TOEIC scores that have had as much as a 350 point difference between the lowest and highest scoring students.

Another problem associated with using standardized test scores such as the ones mentioned above is that the skills required on the test have little or no relevance to the skills focus of the particular course, for instance, discussion, presentation, or EAP classes. If trying to stream students into levels for a predominantly speaking focused course for example, it would be better to give speaking tests than to use a test such as TOEIC that has no speaking component. In addition, students' purpose for studying is not always the same; some are focused on TOEIC/business English, others on TOEFL/academic English, while others may be interested in English for general or specific purposes. Therefore, the types of vocabulary they should be studying, the texts they should be reading or listening to, and the topics they should be discussing are very different. However, as mentioned above, under the one-book-fits-all approach, the problem of mixed abilities and purposes of studying are not dealt with at all.

Invariably, whether using published textbooks or teacher-designed materials, the teacher has to choose a level at which to aim the class at, and this is frequently seen as the middle or intermediate level as it usually contains the largest number of students. However, as mentioned by Watson & Agawa (2010), Childs (2002), and Prodromou (1989), this often results in the level and pace of the class being inappropriate for many of the students, specifically those at the top or bottom of the ability scale. As a result, lower level students often find the materials, activities, or pace of the class too challenging or overwhelming. In contrast, higher level learners are often under challenged, are not learning very much, and find the pace too slow. Ultimately, many of the students become de-motivated under this kind of teacher-centered, one-book-fits-all classroom environment, a result which can often be observed in ever decreasing enthusiasm or motivation and an increasing number of absences as the course progresses.

Solution

A More Flexible Approach

After experiencing the problems outlined above in a number of university and college contexts, it was decided that a more flexible and student-centered approach to language teaching and learning needed to be adopted. An approach to classroom management and material design, which allows students to study materials, carry out activities, and produce language at an appropriate level, and which is better suited to their individual purposes, was developed over a number of years. The activities and approaches adopted were born out of experience, feedback from students, and extensive reading in the area of dealing with mixed abilities (see Šimanová, 2010; Bremmer, 2008; Harris & Snow, 2004; DelliCarpini, 2002; Hess, 2001; Bowler & Parminter, 2005; Ur, 1991). From the teacher's perspective, the approaches and activities in question have hugely improved the dynamics and pace of the class, and seemed to increase motivation, enjoyment, and interaction. Compared to previous years teaching the same courses in the same institutions, energy and interaction levels went up, absenteeism went down, and the results of the postcourse feedback questionnaires were much more positive. Although some of the activities to be discussed have been combined for use within one course, they were not always used together, and never represented the full set of course materials in any of the courses for which I have been responsible.

Activities

The rest of this paper will briefly introduce and explain a number of activities that have been tried, tested, and adapted to meet the challenges faced when teaching medium to large groups of language learners with very different language levels, learning styles or preferences, and purposes of studying. While none of the activities are pedagogically perfect, they are based on sound theoretic

cal and pedagogical principles, and meet the need of many busy teachers for a practical approach to dealing with mixed abilities.

Vocabulary

A common problem in medium to large classes is that vocabulary levels are often quite different. Therefore, adopting the one-book-fits-all approach to vocabulary learning is problematic because the vocabulary presented in a given textbook, whether in word lists or in reading and listening activities, will not be of a suitable level for all of the students. For some students there will be many new words, but for others, the vocabulary presented may be largely known. In addition, the vocabulary that learners should try to acquire is largely dependent on the individual purpose for studying, something which is not taken into account when learning vocabulary solely from a textbook.

Therefore, based on advice from researchers such as Nation (2001), like many other teachers, I choose to present students with frequency based word lists such as the General Service List (GSL), the Academic Word List (AWL), or one of the British National Corpus lists. The particular list the students are given depends on their study goals and objectives, and their vocabulary level, as determined by in-class, precourse tests. For this purpose, a version of Paul Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 1990) is usually used. In most cases, a minimum vocabulary target of between 200 and 300 words per semester, depending on the context and number of class meetings, was given by the teacher, and students were then required to study that number of lexical items using word cards, notebooks, or another method depending on their individual learning styles and preferences. Students were also offered the opportunity to earn extra points for studying more than the minimum required number of lexical items. This system allows all students to study vocabulary which is useful and relevant to their individual purposes and which is it at an appropriate level.

After adopting the approach outlined above, an additional challenge was faced; that of testing. In one particular context, the administration required all students on the course to be tested on vocabulary acquisition. It was also felt by many of the teachers that regular testing provided extra incentive to students with particularly low levels of motivation. However, as students were studying from different parts of the same word lists, or studying from entirely different lists to each other, they could not be given the same vocabulary tests. Therefore, a more autonomous approach to vocabulary testing was developed and adopted as part of the course. Under this system, students' test their partners on their word cards or notebooks using a variety of questions that I developed based on what Nation (2001) describes as the main factors of knowing a word. As far as possible, students are matched with a different partner for each test, and they record each other's scores on the test sheets during the activity (see appendix A). In addition, each student is tested in the same style twice individually by the teacher during the course, both sets of scores are used to form part of the vocabulary grade for the course. The system proved hugely popular with students based on in-class reactions and engagement, completion levels, and postcourse questionnaires. All students met the minimum requirement with many of the students opting to study additional items for extra credit.

Speaking

Many teachers and researchers have commented on Japanese learners' shyness or general reluctance to speak in various classroom environments, including language classes (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001; Kurihara, 2006; Anderson, 1993; Condon, 1984). Many possible causes have been highlighted or proposed in the literature including cultural issues, failings in the education system, and a lack of confidence. However, an equally important point is the effect that being in a mixed ability

class has on students' spoken output. Based on personal experience, students who see themselves as having lower language ability seem more reluctant to speak due to fear of embarrassment at not being understood (Horwitz & Young, 1991; Horwitz, 2001). At the other end of the scale, those with higher abilities often do not want to speak at length or engage in pushed output due to a feeling that their partners will not understand them or that they are not learning anything. In addition, the complexity of the topics plays a huge role in the success or failure of speaking activities in the language classroom. If all students are required to speak about the same topic for the same period of time, some students will find the activity very challenging or even beyond their linguistic ability due to a lack of vocabulary or grammatical knowledge, while higher level learners may find it too easy or boring. The end result is often the same, demotivated learners. To combat this problem, one approach and one activity were adopted in a number of contexts over a number of years with positive results.

Student-selected speaking and discussion topics

To raise motivation and confidence levels, a system which offers learners more involvement and ownership with regard to speaking tasks was implemented. The approach gives learners the chance to choose their own topics, which are not only of interest to them, but which they feel comfortable talking about. This approach also allows them to prepare for the discussions in advance to a level which they think is necessary to successfully carry out the activity. The process and some example topics are outlined in Appendices B and C. As can be seen, the topics created represent three different levels of difficulty and because of this, it is possible to group students and design activities in a number of ways.

First, it is possible to group students by language level and topic complexity. Lower level students' discuss the easier topics,

while higher level learners discuss more challenging topics. Under this system, all groups ideally contain the same number of students and the discussion time is the same for each group, only the level of complexity of topic is different.

Another alternative is to keep students in level-specific groups but have all students discuss the same topic. By giving students time to prepare questions and think about possible answers or opinions outside of class, even lower level students can enter into more complex discussion topics with confidence. Higher-level students generally do not need to spend too much time preparing, but lower level students may need to make notes or write down actual questions in order to feel comfortable and have confidence. However, even after taking into account preparation time, it is likely that higher-level students will be able to talk for longer periods and have more complex discussions. Therefore, in order to allow all students to speak as much as possible at their given level, it may be necessary to organize the groups slightly differently. For example, when carrying out a 15 minute discussion activity, where possible, lower level students could be put in groups of three (approximately five minutes speaking time each), but higher level students would be put in pairs (seven and a half minutes each).

In addition, it is possible to have all students talking about the same topic, but this time in mixed-ability groups. Again, lower level students will generally need to do more prediscussion preparation outside of class, but the effort is rewarded by being able to discuss somewhat more challenging topics with higher level speakers of the foreign language. Here, wherever possible, the number of members in each group and total activity time for each group is the same.

With regard to feedback, as the discussions are taking place, the teacher is able to monitor and make notes of common errors which are then used as the basis for a short group feedback session after the activity. In order to challenge higher level

students, the teacher can ask them to offer corrections or suggestions about the various errors that lower level student have made. Of course, the identity of the student or students who have made the error is withheld and the session is carried out in a positive and constructive manner. When offering corrections or suggestions to higher level speakers, the points focused on can be highlighted as examples of the kind of language that lower level learners could try to use in order to have richer or more in depth discussions in the future.

Again, based on postcourse questionnaires and teacher assessment of classroom interactions and engagement levels, this approach has proven very successful in a number of contexts. Student involvement, confidence, and general interest increased, absenteeism went down, and postcourse feedback was very positive. In postcourse questionnaires and interviews, students stated that they felt much more confident during discussions because they had been given time to prepare, and were comfortable with the topics (that they had chosen). In addition, total discussion time increased during the semester. At the beginning of the course, a 10-minute discussion was quite challenging for most of the students; however, by the end of the course all groups were able to actively engage in 20-minute discussions. Therefore, by having students take ownership in the choice of topics, by providing time for them to plan and prepare questions and ideas about the topic in advance, and by organizing groups and activities a little more creatively, it is possible for all students in the class to participate actively, and with confidence, in discussion activities in the classroom.

Quickspeak

This is a speaking fluency activity that gives students the opportunity to talk at some length about a topic of their choice. The students can either choose a topic from the sheet provided by the teacher, which comes in two levels of difficulty (see Appen-

dix D), or choose their own topic. Students are then given time to prepare outside of class in order to increase speaking time and reduce stress or anxiety. As the preparation is done outside of class, lower level students have enough time to prepare and can think for a little longer, make slightly more notes, or use a dictionary. More confident learners, however, need do less preparation and can speak for longer during the class. One of the advantages of the activity is that the complexity and length at which students talk can be varied to suit learners' individual levels. Again, this activity has proved very successful and enjoyable for the students, with everyone speaking as quickly as they can for as long as they can about a variety of topics and increasing their speaking time and speed during the course of the semester or academic year.

Writing

The above activity can be done as a writing fluency task, giving each student a specified amount of time to write as quickly as they can without stopping. In most contexts in which this has been carried out so far, ten minutes seems to be an appropriate amount of time for students to be able to express ideas fluently and coherently at some depth. As the focus is on fluency, student writing is not checked or graded on accuracy, but is instead graded on writing speed improvement based on average word count.

Reading

Much has been written regarding how to adapt reading materials to suit different levels, and although the workshop this paper is based on did give some examples of how this can be done quickly and easily, this paper focuses on Differentiated Instruction (DI) which is defined by Tomlinson (2003) as "the process of teachers proactively planning various opportunities for learning in order to meet students' diverse learning needs".

Watson and Agawa (2011) refer to DI as a philosophy of considering teaching and learning by placing student outcomes at the forefront of all planning, instruction, and assessment. Therefore, in terms of reading in a foreign language, it was felt that the main outcome should be the learning or improvement of a variety of skills as well as vocabulary acquisition by giving students the best possible opportunity to read material at a suitable level, spend enough time on task, and be exposed to various reading skills. In my own teaching context, I wanted to adopt a holistic approach to reading by including intensive reading, speed reading, and extensive reading. However, after taking into account the different vocabulary levels and reading abilities highlighted through precourse vocabulary and reading tests, it was felt that a holistic approach could not be easily achieved under the one-book-fits-all approach.

Therefore, a more student-centered system with a focus on DI was developed that is in direct opposition to the beliefs expressed by Bowler and Parminter (2005), who state that "No one wants to use three different course books in one class: one for stronger students, one for weak students, and one for midlevel students" (1997). By applying some of the principles of extensive reading laid down by authors such as Day and Bamford (2002) and Waring (1997) to other forms of reading such as intensive and speed reading, it is possible for all students to read material at what Krashen and Terrell (1983) call a comprehensible level, thus increasing the efficacy of the reading carried out, reducing stress or anxiety, and increasing confidence and motivation. It effectively deals with the problem of teaching reading with mixed ability learners in a simple, student-focused manner.

Under this system all student were provided with intensive reading and speed reading textbooks from the same publisher and author but at a level appropriate to their linguistic ability; three levels were used in each class. The students carried out

reading both in class and for homework, and worked cooperatively in groups to help each other better understand the passages and any comprehension activities. The teacher's role was to teach skills and provide support, advice, answers, and guidance for the students as necessary. Once again, this system seemed to be effective with all students reading more passages than in previous reading courses of the same length, making marked improvement on reading speed and overall comprehension. In addition, in postcourse questionnaires, students generally seemed to find the system enjoyable and felt they were reading material at a suitable level and making real progress.

Conclusion

The issue of having learners of very mixed abilities and purposes for studying in the same class is a common challenge faced by many teachers, especially those dealing with medium to large classes. Due to a variety of administrative, financial, and logistical constraints it is unlikely the issue will ever be truly solved. Therefore, as teachers we have to find ways to better deal with the problem. However, it is widely accepted that steadfastly sticking to a very teacher-centered approach is not the way to do it. On the contrary, in order to give all learners an equal chance at improving their foreign language ability within a classroom setting, the focus must shift to more student-centered, autonomous, and differentiated instruction methods and approaches. This paper has tried to highlight some of the common challenges facing teachers today, at least in medium to large class contexts in a college or university setting in Japan. It has also tried to offer some practical advice and some examples of how busy teachers can easily and effectively deal with the problem in a planned manner. While none of the activities are necessarily perfect, they are pedagogically sound, practical, and have proved popular and successful with medium to large groups of relatively low motivated mixed ability learners.

Bio Data

Darrell Wilkinson is a lecturer in the World Language Center at Soka University, Japan where he teaches predominantly EAP. He has taught English in Thailand, Vietnam, Spain, England, and Japan. His chief research interests include ESL reading and writing, EAP, learner autonomy, and dealing with mixed abilities.

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Appendix A: Vocabulary Test Score Sheet

- Take your partners word cards/notebook etc. and test them on 10 of their words.
- Ask AT LEAST THREE questions about each word.
 - How do you say _____ in Japanese/English?
 - What part of speech is _____?
 - » What is the past/past progressive tense of _____? (for verbs)
 - » Is _____ countable or non-countable? (for nouns)
 - What is the adjective/verb/noun/adverb form of _____? (If applicable)
 - How do you spell _____?
 - How many syllables is _____?
- If they get ALL questions correct, write 1 in the box. If not, write 0.
- If your partner can also make a sentence using the word, you can give an extra point. (1+1)

N.B. Please ask if you want me to check/provide a sentence, teach pronunciation or other word forms etc.

	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4	Test 5	Test 6	Test 7	Test 8	Test 9	Test 10	Test 11	Test 12
Word 1												
Word 2												
Word 3												
Word 4												
Word 5												
Word 6												
Word 7												
Word 8												
Word 9												
Word 10												
Total												
											Total	

Appendix B: Procedure for Generating Student-Selected Speaking Topics

1. Early on in the course, students make a list (individually) of 5-10 topics they would like to talk about in class.
2. Students then form groups of 3 or 4 with student at a similar level to them and share ideas, find common topics etc. and compile a list of up to 10 topics.
3. The teacher collects the lists from students and identifies common topics.
4. Make a master list of around 15 common topics and distribute to the students in the following class.
5. Select one topic per class.
6. Set homework:
 - a. Students write 3 or 4 discussion questions (lower level students) or make notes (higher level students) for each topic.
 - b. They should check their grammar using grammar text books, sheet prepared by a teacher, Google search or www.whitesmoke.com
7. In class the students form groups and use their questions as a base for conversation/discussion.
8. As the teacher knows the topic in advance, it is possible to prepare some materials or instructional ideas on appropriate grammatical forms, vocabulary, phrases etc. related to the topic area. This can then be covered with students before the speaking activity.

Appendix C: Examples of Student-Selected Speaking Topics

Level 1

Hobbies	Food	Future Goals	Family
Travel	Jobs	The Internet	Celebrities
Money	Dating	Study	Mobile Phones
YouTube	Shopping	Music	Seasons
Culture	Festivals	TV	
Sports	Movies	Public Transport	

Level 2

1. Is it better to live in the city or the countryside?
2. Should students wear school uniforms? (Think about ALL students; elementary, junior high school, high school AND university students).
3. Why is it important for students to study a foreign language?
4. What are 5 things you want to do in the future?
5. If you could change three things about this school, what would they be?

Level 3

1. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Technology has made the world a better place to live.
2. What are some ways individuals can help improve the environment and reduce global warming?
3. What do you think the legal age for the following should be in Japan? Drinking, smoking, driving, voting, getting married? Why?

4. Do you think correspondence education is a good idea?
5. Would you like to work for a small company or a big company? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

Appendix D: Quickspeak Procedure and Topics

Quickspeak

- Please choose a topic from this list below.
- Think about the topic outside of class (you can make some basic notes if it helps).
- With a partner, speak quickly for 2 minutes about the topic (use as much English as possible and get used to speaking for longer).
- For each question— think about it:
- What do you think? Why?
- Give as many reasons and examples as you can.

Topics (A)

1. Your favorite place (town, city, shopping center, theme park etc.)
2. 5 things that make you happy
3. 5 things that make you angry
4. What you did last weekend
5. What you are planning to do this weekend
6. An important person in your life
7. 5 things you hope to do in the future
8. 3 places you would like to visit and what you would like to do there
9. 3 places you have visited and what you did there
10. An important experience you have had

11. 5 ways to help/improve the environment
12. Your hobbies
13. Something new you would like to try
14. Describe a family member; mother, father, sister, grandmother, etc.
15. If you were very very rich, what would you do/buy?

Quickspeak

- Please choose a topic from this list below.
- Think about the topic (you can make some basic notes if it helps you).
- Speak quickly for 3 minutes about the topic (use as much English as possible and get used to speaking for longer).
- For each question— think about it:
- What do you think? Why?
- Give as many reasons and examples as you can.

Topics (B)

1. Describe a significant interest or experience that has special meaning for you.
2. Describe one of your grandparents. What has he/she accomplished in life? Would you like to be like him/her?
3. What are your long term career goals?
4. Does any specific attribute, quality or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
5. How would your friends characterize you?
6. What are your dreams for the future? Now looking back at everything you have done, what would you like to change?
7. Where do you see yourself, career wise, 10 years from now?

8. Who was the most influential person in your life? How did this person make you want to become better?
9. What is your approach to life? Reveal your life philosophy.
10. What was the most difficult time in your life? How did you overcome these difficulties? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?
11. Describe your most rewarding experience.
12. Have you ever struggled for something and failed? How did you respond? Have you experienced a feeling of disappointment and dissatisfaction with yourself?
13. Discuss your academic background and achievements.
14. Choose a prominent person (living, deceased, or fictional) that you would like to interview and explain why.