The challenge of mixed-ability classes

-How should upper secondary English teachers work in order to help the weaker students?

Ann-Christin Svärd
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The purpose of this essay is to find out how upper secondary English teachers should work in order to reach the weaker students. I am interested in what has been written about mixed-ability classes, the challenges they present and most of all how teachers of English need to work in such classes to reach all students, especially the weaker ones.

I have also interviewed three upper secondary teachers about how they work to reach the weaker students in their classes.

My findings are that, according to the teachers interviewed, the best way to deal with the problem is to bring back ability grouping. The literature I read mostly had negative views on this method and stressed the importance of differentiation and motivation instead. Both the literature and the teachers claimed that a good atmosphere, clear instructions, structure and setting routines were the most important factors when working with mixed ability classes.

Search words: Mixed-Ability, multilevel ESL classes, L2 learners, differentiated classroom, teaching strategies.
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Introduction

Working as a teacher in English provides challenges every day. The teacher has to face 25-30 students at a time who are all at different levels of ability, have varying motivation for working with English and have their own special interests and experiences. The teacher meets these mixed-ability classes each day.

I am going to write about what mixed-ability classes are and the challenges they present but most of all how a teacher should work in these classes in order to help all the students, especially the weaker ones.

I have chosen to write about this because I feel it is a problem that all teachers are faced with. I myself have encountered this each time I have been out on my school placement, and most teachers I have met on those occasions have talked about the difficulty of teaching large mixed-ability classes. I have found it difficult to know how to motivate all the students in each class, especially the weaker ones.

The curriculum for the non-compulsory school system, Lpf 94, claims that: “Special attention must be given to those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals of education. For this reason education can never be the same for all.” (p4). I believe that this is an important starting point when teachers try to find out how to deal with the challenge of teaching mixed-ability classes. The curriculum says that education should be equivalent for all, but that the education can only be equal if we take into account each student’s ability level, ways of learning, interests and so on. This means that the ways towards achieving the goals of education can look different for each student in order for the education to be equivalent.

I will divide my essay into two equally important parts, the background and the analysis. In the background I will present what is known about mixed-ability classes and how to reach the weaker students, and the analysis will be based on my interviews with English teachers in an upper secondary school.
Aim

The aims of my essay are to find out what resource literature says about how English teachers should work in large mixed-ability classes to make sure they help all students improve their English and also to find out what views three upper secondary English teachers have on how to reach all students. I have chosen to limit the area I am going to investigate by focusing on upper secondary English teachers and how they need to work to help the weaker students in mixed-ability classes.

The question that I intend to try and answer is the following:

How should upper secondary English teachers work in large mixed-ability classes in order to help the weaker students?
Method

I have used resource literature and interviews to find the answer to my question. I chose literature concerning the topics of large mixed-ability classes and how teachers should work in these classes to reach all students. I also chose literature about the underachievers and how to help them in class, and literature about how teachers should teach to promote learning for all students. The background is based on the relevant information I found in these books.

The second equally important part of my essay is the analysis, which I based on the separate interviews conducted with three upper secondary English teachers. The interviewees were one female teacher with 40 years of experience, one male teacher with 8 years of experience and one female special teacher of English with 36 years of teaching English experience. The reason why a special teacher of English was interviewed was because I believed it could be of importance for regular English teachers to know what approaches these teachers use when working with the weaker students. These teachers have only weaker students in their classes and know how they need to work to progress.

The interview questions were sent to the teachers by e-mail one week before the interviews. Each interview was oral and recorded. The teachers had been asked beforehand if it would be alright with them if our interview was recorded, and they all agreed to this arrangement.

The questions asked started out as more general ones and then became more focused on how to work with the weaker students. The interview was based on these questions, but the teachers were also free to add other important ideas.

In the analysis each question is dealt with in order, and the teacher’s responses are presented.

In the last part of the essay, the conclusion, I have tried to sum up the important facts I found in the sources and compared that to the way the teachers think you should approach the weaker students.
Background

What is a mixed-ability class?

Mixed-ability classes means classes where students differ greatly in ability, motivation for learning English, needs, interests, educational background, styles of learning, anxiety, experiences and so on (Ainslie, 1994).

All teachers have to face the challenge of mixed-ability classes because, according to Tomlinson (1999), Berry & Williams (2002) and Shank (1995), every class is multileveled. Some classes can be more multileveled than others and therefore more challenging for the teacher, but all classes are mixed-ability classes.

Challenges

Baker (2002) argues that it is not just the fact that there are many students in a class, but that all of them are at so many different ability levels that provides the biggest challenge. She further claims that in mixed-ability classes it can be difficult to keep the attention of all students. Their motivation can be poor and the teacher can feel frustrated because he/she does not have enough time to help the weaker students.

In addition to the above mentioned challenges students have their own way of learning, and the weaker ones probably have more difficulties working in a noisy atmosphere since they are usually more easily distracted (Kelly, 1974).

A mixed-ability class can seem uncooperative, the students can get bored easily and this can cause commotion in the classroom. Planning the lesson and making work-material can take too much time for the teacher and the planned material is often too easy or too difficult for the students. This may make the teacher feel inadequate and unable to cope with the class (Hess, 2001).

A huge problem that we must not forget, according to Bowman (1992), is the teacher’s unawareness of the need for a new approach to deal with the mixed-ability class.
Is grouping students the solution?

Tomlinson (1999) argues that grouping students into one “slow” and one “fast” separate class has been researched, and studies show that students do not improve enough to fit into a typical class, and that they stay remedial.

There are both positive and negative sides to grouping students. One positive side is that the lesson can be easier to plan and manage in some ways since the teacher does not have such a wide range of abilities to deal with. On the other hand to separate the slow learners can do harm to their social and emotional difficulties because by being placed in a “slow class” they can think of themselves as different, difficult, inferior or other negative terms (Kelly, 1974).

Dörnyei (2001) stresses the importance of a positive attitude among the teachers who are to teach these weaker groups:

This means, for example, that ability grouping is a dangerous practice because teachers who are to teach the low ability groups are bound to be influenced by this knowledge, which may send the children on an ever downward spiral of low achievement and low expectations. (Dörnyei, 2001, p 35)

What is important when working with mixed-ability classes?

Creating a good atmosphere

The advice on how to work with these classes is appropriate for students of all ages and abilities (Kelly, 1974). It is important for teachers to create a relaxed, positive atmosphere in the classroom (Ainslie, 1994). Wright (2005) supports this theory, and he also claims that there is a strong connection between a good classroom atmosphere and having good behaviour management. This will create a good learning situation.
In order to create a good environment it is vital for the teacher to form a good relationship between him/herself and the students. Examples of how to do that are to learn the students’ names as quickly as possible, as well as learn about their lives, what they like/do not like, interests and difficulties. This should be started as early as possible in a new course, for example by writing a letter to the students and asking them to write back about themselves. This makes the students feel looked upon as individuals and promotes a good relationship (Hess, 2001).

Anxiety can be a barrier for some students according to Brown (2002). Students can be afraid of making mistakes when they write or talk because of the fear of being laughed at. According to Lessow-Hurley (2003) it is important for the teacher not to rely too much on correctness but to focus on communicative competence and create motivating situations with a calm and welcoming environment where the students know that it is normal to make mistakes as it is a part of the learning process. This can lead to less anxiety among the students.

It is also important to set certain rules with the students about how to behave in order not to interfere with a good learning situation. A teacher should discuss proper rules for a good learning situation with the students and why the class needs to have them. (Bowman, 1992)

Clear organization is vital in order to create a good atmosphere. A teacher should not just explain what they are going to do each lesson but also why it is important, what they are going to learn and how they are going to work, for example pair work, individual and so on. The teacher should begin each lesson by giving clear instructions to the whole class and end by addressing the whole class to get routines, both daily but also weekly. These routines create a sense of stability and structure which is helpful to many weaker students (Bowman, 1992).

For a teacher, assessment is very important, not just after each unit but on a day to day level. This is important because it helps to see how the lesson went and how it can be improved next time by better instructions, group work etc (Tomlinson, 1999).
Developing the student’s responsibility for learning

It is important to let the students be part of assessment by letting them discuss in small groups with the teacher for example how an assignment went, what could have been improved and so on. Journal writing, whole class discussion or individual written assessments given to the teacher can also be good ways for the students to give the teacher helpful ideas on how to improve different aspects of teaching (Tomlinson, 1999).

Brown (2002) and Supple (1990) both stress the importance of helping the students to learn different learning strategies so the students can develop their own study skills that work for them, since all students have their own ways of learning. It can be very helpful to allow the students to create their own study guides for a test and so on.

A teacher should also promote cooperation and collaboration, according to Kelly (1974) and Hess (2001). They further argue that teachers should encourage the students to help each other out, to ask classmates for help and give each other feedback on their work because this improves the students’ ability to take responsibility for their learning.

Hess (2001) stresses the importance of letting the students monitor their work and their progress by for example using checklists of what to do.

Teaching, of course, ultimately depends on the willingness of the student to learn: unless the learner takes some responsibility in the shape of active cooperation and effort, there will be no learning in spite of the efforts of excellent teachers (Hess, 2001, p 159).

It can be very useful for the weaker students to be provided with self-assess material so the student can follow his/her progress and evaluate how it goes. This material needs to have clear instructions on what the student needs to do and also provide some questions for the student to reflect over when a task has been completed (Shank, 1995).
Goldstein (1998) claims that helping the students plan their work and develop study skills is a good way to increase the students’ responsibility for their own learning, which should be the goal for the teacher to attain. Letting the students gradually develop responsibility builds up their self esteem, and in this process it is important for the teacher to give encouragement and positive feedback.

**Giving clear instructions**

One of the most important ways to deal with mixed-ability classes is to always give clear information and instructions and to present it in easy, manageable ways. This contributes to making the students feel it is more meaningful and interesting. A teacher should introduce tasks clearly by using different methods. The teacher should give the students the information in the whole class, and showing an overhead or writing on the board (Kelly, 1974).

When explaining something to the students it is very useful to show concrete examples and illustrations. Using several methods to inform the students reinforces their understanding. After they have been given clear instructions it is advisable to give them time to think and discuss with their workmate and then ask questions (Dörnyei, 2001).

It is important to plan bigger tasks in manageable steps because if the task is not clearly presented to the students, and they are uncertain about how to go on with the task, it can create a problematic situation. Some of the students may feel it is too hard for them, and some may even give up (Baker, 2000).

**Motivation and differentiation**

According to Leiding (2002) the students’ own interests and experiences, their own ideas and emotions should be considered when planning lessons. Much research has been done on the importance of taking advantage of these aspects:

Teachers’ insistence on attending to students’ experiences, interests, and prior knowledge was once thought to result from a disregard for scientific methods. Now, however, these considerations are supported by cognitive research demonstrating that learning is a process of making meaning out of new or unfamiliar events in light of familiar ideas or experiences (Leiding, 2002, p 37-38).
To use activities that are student-centred is one of the solutions to dealing with mixed-ability teaching, according to Berry and Williams (1992).

The content needs to be relevant for the students, and it needs to be linked to the tasks. This can be done by letting them express their own ideas and describe their own experiences when talking and writing. The teacher should connect what has been worked with to their experiences by asking them to put themselves in the situation they read about, heard or watched. This gives meaning to the task because it concerns the students more directly (Tomlinson, 1999).

Hess (2001) stresses the importance of students sharing their opinions and relating to their own experiences but also the need for them to share their future plans. Hess argues that it is important to incorporate open-ended questions which relate to what each student thinks about a specific situation, event and so on.

Dörnyei (2001) claims that it is vital for the teacher to show his/her own positive attitude and enthusiasm for what they teach: “…enthusiasm for one’s specialisation area and the ability to make this enthusiasm public rather than hiding it is one of the most important ingredients of motivationally successful teaching” (p 33).

Green (2000) mentions the use of computer tasks to increase motivation, for example programs where students can practice grammar, vocabulary but also using a computer to write letters, e-mails and finding information, and other exercises. “Much has been written about its potential for motivating pupils, especially the less able…” (p67).

According to Goldstein (1998), asking questions before the reading and by using titles, pictures and so on to get the students to discuss what they think a text is about, encourages students when they are going to work with it. This method improves their understanding, and it gets the students engaged in thinking about reading.
Differentiation plays a big part in solving how to motive the students, according to Tomlinson (1999) and Kelly (1974). Tomlinson (1999) argues that differentiation is needed in three areas of teaching: the material, the process and the product. The material can be differentiated by using articles, short stories, films, radio programs, plays, songs, poems etc. The process means how the students work with the material and can be differentiated by using whole class discussions, pair work, group work, individual work etc. The product includes the way the student show what they have learned, for example through a test or different kinds of presentations etc. Tomlinson claims that students cannot learn if they are unmotivated as they then feel it is inaccessible. We learn more when what is taught connects to our interests and our own way of learning.

Ainslie (1994) and Wright (2005) also agree with the view that differentiation is important in mixed-ability classes. One key to a good differentiated classroom is to occasionally include the students in the choice of their topics and the media to work with.

As has been previously stated, there are several aspects a teacher needs to think about when working in a mixed-ability class. Bowman (1992) states: “Students are very resourceful. They can create problems or generate solutions, depending on how you engage and maintain their attention” (p23). Therefore it is very important how the teacher acts toward his/her students and what atmosphere is promoted.
Analysis

I will now account for the results of the interviews carried out with the three upper secondary English teachers. I will go through each question in order and comment on all three teachers’ responses. The interview questions are also included at the end of my essay in the appendix.

1. How long have you been an English teacher?

The male teacher answered eight years, the female teacher about forty years and the special teacher thirty-six years.

2. Do you think that students, in general, in English classes are at many different ability levels? Is it a problem? Why/Why not?

All three teachers answered that it is a big problem for teachers today and that the differences are due to the students’ different backgrounds. The female teacher added that she has noticed that the standard of English knowledge has changed over the last few years as well. It has lowered. She believes it is because of all the different reforms in teaching and in the school system. The special teacher said that when the students start learning English for the first time they are all at the same level, but the longer they study English the bigger the differences in abilities get. Some make great progress fast while others fall behind. Some claim that the solution is individualization but she thinks that this is impossible with a large class. All three teachers shared this opinion.
3. Do you think dividing the English classes into ability groups would be a good way to deal with the problem? Why/Why not?

All three teachers were very positive towards ability grouping which had been tried at their school for a number of years, and they all thought it improved the situation for both the weaker students and the faster ones. The male teacher told me that instead of having 30-32 students in each English class, there were about 15 in each group. The students were divided according to the results of an English test. Since the groups were smaller the teacher had more time to help each student and could adjust the teaching. The female teacher added that the system of divided classes was flexible. If a student felt he/she was in the wrong group they could change group. It worked well, and the students said so themselves. All three teachers said that the reason the school does not have this system anymore is because politicians and the school board did not approve of this system. The special teacher added that the only problem with this method is that it is not accepted nowadays. From a teaching aspect there is no better and more effective solution. All three teachers seemed to share her opinion, and the female teacher said that in a regular class it is impossible to help everyone: “How can you find time to challenge the really clever students and at the same time deal with the weaker ones who hardly understand what you are saying?”

4. What do you think that the English teacher can do to improve learning for the weaker students?

Each teacher gave different suggestions. The male teacher thought that the most important thing is how the students are spoken to and treated. It is also important to vary the material and not only use the course book. He believed the teacher needs to get the students interested in learning English and appeal to their interests at times.
The female teacher believed that the most important thing to do as a teacher is to ask for more resources. Schools need to have more special teachers of English as long as the local school board goes on opposing ability groups. Other resources can be to have an assistant teacher in the classroom that helps the weaker ones. The weaker students might be placed in group rooms and receive different exercises and so on.

The special teacher stressed the need for easy and clear instructions and much support from the teacher. She also added that it is important to go through things systematically and help the students to create **structure**. The students need to know exactly what is expected of them. This applies to *all* students. The teacher needs to go slowly and not continue until everybody understands. That is the biggest problem in regular classes because the pace is too fast. She believed that all of this is hard to do in a regular class with many students; the weaker students should be in smaller groups.

**5. How do you approach the weaker students? Do you help them in a specific way?**

The female and the male teacher thought that it was important to make the students feel safe and not nervous in class. The teacher needs to have patience with the students and let them take their time. The teacher should also be open to bringing in the students’ interests in discussions and writing. All three teachers believed that the teacher has to be as clear as possible, use the white board or overhead, and use different exercises and different papers to hand out, and always have time for the weaker students.

The female teacher added that it is important for the teacher to try to discover what level the student is at as early as possible and then talk to the student about what system he/she would like. For example, if he/she would like the teacher to teach him/her specially for half an hour somewhere else or if they would prefer going to the special teacher in English. She also thought that trying to find easy but interesting exercises for them to work with is another good way to approach the weaker ones.
The special teacher stressed the importance of thorough instructions more than the other teachers. She believed that the students need to know exactly what they are going to do and how. They need to know what is expected of them. She works systematically with each text they read, and this is one of the differences I noticed between her and the other teachers. She says she is old fashioned in her teaching and she does not work with special texts that appeal to the student’s interests but just normal texts that can be found in text books. She adds other texts and she does not have to consider their interests as they work very well with whatever she gives them. They trust that if they do as she says, they will improve and get a pass in English. She develops a personal relationship with the students, encourages them and gives them positive feedback. She always corrects all their mistakes and talks to them about what they need to work more with. Structures and routines give the students security. The teacher should divide bigger parts into smaller easier steps; the students need to know what to do and how to do it. I found the special teacher’s approach very convincing, and it sounded as if her method worked really well.

6. How do you think an English teacher can motivate the weaker students?

There was once again a difference in what the regular English teachers thought and what the special teacher thought. The male and the female teacher answered that the teacher needs to show his/her own interest in what he/she teaches and show that he/she thinks it is important and fun.

The female teacher added that she believes it is important to try to let the students understand what English is useful for and also try to make them formulate their own goals, what they want to accomplish. This was something that the special teacher also thought.
The special teacher told me that the ones who choose to come to her are motivated and they want to pass the A course. She believed that it is not easy to get someone motivated if the motivation does not come first of all from the student. Some can be tired of school or have serious personal problems. She added that teachers can of course try motivating and encouraging the students but they cannot do more than try. She did not believe that making the lessons more varied and appealing to their interests would motivate the students that are tired of school and do not have any motivation to learn English. She does not have to appeal to the weaker students’ interests at all or make her lessons more varied. She works systematically with each text in the same way and creates routines, and the students work really well with this.

7. What is important, in the classroom situation, to make the best possible environment for the weaker students?

All three teachers thought a quiet and calm atmosphere was important. They all also believed that the teacher needs to use very clear instructions. It is not enough to just say something. The teacher needs to write on the board, repeat, walk around and make sure they know what to do.

The female teacher added that the teacher must be very well prepared and know exactly what he/she is going to do, and always bring extra material. The teacher also has to encourage everyone. It is important to give positive feedback, comment on both content and language and give them advice on what they need to practice more, not just correct the mistakes.

The special teacher also added that the students need to feel that they know what to do, how to do it and that they understand and do not feel stupid. It is important to enhance their self-confidence, so they are not afraid to ask questions. She also believed that it is very important how the teacher approaches them. The teacher may need to decrease the material to work with as well as give them time and offer extra help.
8. Do you talk to your students, one at a time, about how they are doing in English and what they need to improve?

Again there was a difference between what the regular teachers said and what the special teacher said. The male and the female teacher said that they did so at least once each course, often once in the middle and another time at the end, after the national tests. Both wished they had more time to talk to the students. If a student has specific problems they usually talk with him/her earlier and may even contact the special teacher in English. The student can be given the offer to take an extended A course with the special teacher instead. The male teacher said that he tries to motivate them by encouraging them, boosting their self confidence, telling them not to compare themselves with others in the class. Both the male and the female teacher give the students advice on how to improve.

The special teacher told me that she has these talks all the time. She always encourages each student, and if she is displeased she lets them know that too. She discusses what is hard for them and how they think she could help them, for example if they would like more individual help. She gives them tips all the time. It is a constant dialogue.

9. What kind of special help in English does your school offer? At what point do you offer this to the student?

All teachers told me that they offer the help of a special teacher in English and that they get this offer early. Every student does a test in English, Swedish and Maths when they start upper secondary school, and based on their results some students get the chance to go to a special teacher in English. There are two kinds of special help. The first one is just support in addition to the regular English classes, and the second one is an offer of special teaching in English only. The second one is offered if the student does not pass the A course. They are then given the opportunity to attend a prolonged A course with the special teacher instead. It has been shown that the students who get this extra help really appreciate it.
The female teacher added that she thought the school should have more special teachers in English. It is necessary because now all students have to study English, and not all are motivated to do so. She believed that we need more resources because the number of students needing extra help is increasing. But it is very important to talk to the student about it, show that we care and that they have to decide what is best for them.
Conclusion

The aims of my essay were to find out what has been written about how an English teacher should work with mixed ability classes and what views three upper secondary teachers had on this issue. I found out that there was some agreement between the written sources’ views and the teachers, but there were also disagreements.

The written sources and the teachers I interviewed agreed on the same type of difficulties with mixed-ability classes; it is hard to keep everyone’s attention, hard to motivate everyone. The teacher feels that he/she does not have enough time to help all students, the students can be easily bored, and planning the lesson to meet all students’ different needs is time consuming.

I discovered that it was important for the teacher working in a mixed ability class to create a good atmosphere where the students feel secure, can voice their opinions and ask questions without feeling anxious. One of the most important things for the teacher to aim for is to be clear and structured, according to the teachers I spoke to. The literature I read also brought up this point as a vital element to focus on when working in mixed-ability classes.

According to the written sources it was important to help students improve their own learning techniques and develop their cooperation and collaboration with their peers. This was also something that the teachers mentioned, as they thought small groups work and peer work was beneficial for the students.

A large part of the written sources focused on differentiation and motivation. They stressed using a variety of teaching methods, different materials and types of tasks as well as incorporating the students’ own experiences and ideas into the work. The teachers did not focus as much on these aspects. The special teacher did not agree with the written sources opinions on this as she did not find it necessary at all. She never appealed to the students’ interests. She only worked systematically and in a structured way with each text to create routines, and the weaker students worked really well with this and do improve. She believes that being clear and setting routines are more important since the weaker students’ lives are often unstructured, and they feel comfortable with stable routines because they cannot handle too much free thinking and choices, according to her. I found her approach very convincing.
The most interesting part of my essay was the question whether grouping students is a good way to deal with mixed ability classes. The literature focused on the negative connotations the students and the teachers have with this system of “slower” groups. The students feel more negatively about themselves if they are in such a group which could, according to the literature, do more harm that good. The one positive thing the literature brought up about ability grouping was that is was easier for the teacher to plan the lessons more appropriately. The views of the teachers I talked with were quite the opposite. They were all very positive towards this system since they all had several years’ experience of this system. They felt that it was better not only for the teachers but for the students as well, and most students thought so as well when they talked to them. The groups were much smaller. They could adjust the material more appropriately, use a slower tempo and have more time to help the weaker students. The female and the special teacher both claimed that this was the best solution for the students.

I realise that this essay is only a small investigation. I interviewed three teachers, and maybe the results would have been different had I interviewed more teachers. Based on the written sources and the answers from the teachers I interviewed I believe my answer to my question would be to have ability groups again with one basic, one middle and one fast group. I have come to the conclusion that this could be a good solution to the problem. But since this is not available we have to use other methods instead. Then I think my answer to my question is to be structured, set up routines, be very clear, go forward slowly in teaching and bring in students’ own interests and ideas and occasionally alter the course book with other resources.

Words: 5778.
Works cited:


Appendix

Interview questions:

1. How long have you been an English teacher?
2. Do you think that students, in general, in English classes are at many different ability levels? Is it a problem? Why? / Why not?
3. Do you think dividing the English classes into one “faster” and one “slower” group would be a good way to deal with the different ability levels? Why? / Why not?
4. What do you think that the English teacher can do to improve learning for the weaker students?
5. How do you approach the weaker students? Do you help them in a specific way?
6. How do you think an English teacher can motivate the weaker students?
7. What is important, in the classroom situation, to make the best possible environment for the weaker students?
8. Do you talk to your students, one at a time, about how they are doing in English and what they need to improve?
9. What kind of special help in English does your school offer? At what point do you offer this to the student?