

UDC 378.881

DOI <https://doi.org/10.24919/2308-4863/40-2-45>

Tetiana NIFAKA,

orcid.org/0000-0002-9239-3299

*Candidate in Pedagogy, Associate Professor,
Associate Professor at the Department of English Philology
Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University
(Lutsk, Ukraine) nifakatania@gmail.com*

Olena BOVDA,

orcid.org/0000-0001-7280-1147

*Assistant at the Department of Foreign Languages Natural Sciences and Mathematics Majors
Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University
(Lutsk, Ukraine) kafprims@gmail.com*

ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF TEACHING MULTILEVEL CLASSES

The article highlights teaching in multilevel groups. The terms mixed-ability classes and multilevel classes are specified. The definition of multilevel groups/classes is given. The term, multilevel groups, is used to describe groups of people who communicate in English at various levels. As learners are different in language proficiency, in attitude towards language, and in learning styles, it is stated that most language classes are multileveled. They tend to be heterogeneous. The major challenges of teaching in multilevel classrooms are outlined: 1) determining the individual needs of a student; 2) providing students' motivation and interest; 3) organizing appropriate groupings within the class; 4) looking for/working out appropriate graded tasks (multitasking), teaching resources and material. To meet the teaching challenges in multilevel groups a teacher is recommended to carry out needs assessment to determine students' motivation, learning styles, levels of proficiency in English. Data are collected in the form of interest surveys, multiple intelligence surveys, observation, formative assessments, daily assignments and performances, summative assessments. Grouping strategies are found to be effective in multilevel settings. To deal with fast finishers in classes such activities are proved to be successful: checking work (students may have error checklists to help them to do this), helping other students who have not finished yet (it fosters a sense of support and cooperation among learners), extension activities (to write some more questions, to do another task which asks students to react to the text in some way, etc.), additional exercises. Multitasking provides students with motivation, helps them succeed. Teachers are sure to look for and prepare various tasks and materials to practise different language items and skills according to students' needs. Taking into account the challenges and the ways of meeting them a teacher is sure to enhance students' communicative skills and makes learning more effective.

Key words: *multilevel classes, challenge, needs assessment, motivation, learning styles, grouping, multitasking.*

Тетяна НІФАКА,

orcid.org/0000-0002-9239-3299

*кандидат педагогічних наук, доцент,
доцент кафедри англійської філології
Волинського національного університету імені Лесі Українки
(Луцьк, Україна) nifakatania@gmail.com*

Олена БОВДА,

orcid.org/0000-0001-7280-1147

*асистент кафедри іноземних мов природничо-математичних спеціальностей
Волинського національного університету імені Лесі Українки
(Луцьк, Україна) kafprims@gmail.com*

ПЕРЕВАГИ ТА ПРОБЛЕМИ ВИКЛАДАННЯ В БАГАТОРІВНЕВИХ КЛАСАХ

У статті розглядається викладання англійської мови в багаторівневих групах. Терміни, що визначають такі класи (змішані та багаторівневі), уточнюються. Визначення багаторівневих груп / класів надається. У багаторівневих класах навчаються учні/студенти, які спілкуються англійською мовою на різних рівнях. Оскільки всі ті, хто навчається, різняться за мовними здібностями, за рівнем володіння мовою та загальним ставленням до мови, а також за стилями навчання, зазначено, що більшість мовних класів є багаторівневими. Вони, як правило, неоднорідні. Окреслені основні проблеми викладання в багаторівневих класах: 1) визначення

індивідуальних потреб кожного учня; 2) забезпечення мотивації та зацікавленості всіх учнів; 3) організація відповідних групувань у класі; 4) пошук / розробка відповідних градуйованих завдань (багатозадачність), навчальних ресурсів та матеріалів. Для вирішення викладацьких завдань у багаторівневих групах вчителю рекомендується провести оцінку потреб, щоб визначити мотивацію учнів, стилі навчання, рівні володіння англійською мовою. Доцільним є проведення тестування, анкетування, спостереження, опитування, поточне оцінювання завдань та виступів, підсумкове оцінювання. Встановлено, що стратегії групування є ефективними у багаторівневих групах. Для роботи зі студентами, які швидко закінчують виконання завдань, рекомендуються такі заходи: перевірка роботи (студенти мають контрольні списки помилок для допомоги у цьому), допомога іншим студентам, які ще не закінчили виконання завдань (це сприяє відчуттю підтримки та співпраці серед учнів), додаткові вправи (написати ще кілька запитань, виконати ще одне завдання, та інші). Багатозадачність забезпечує студентів мотивацією, можливістю правильного виконання завдань та дозволяє досягти успіху. Вчителі розробляють та готують різноманітні завдання та матеріали для формування мовних та мовленнєвих компетентностей відповідно до потреб учнів. Урахування вказаних положень та їх реалізація в навчальному процесі дозволяє забезпечити його продуктивність.

Ключові слова: багаторівневі класи, виклик, оцінка потреб, мотивація, стилі навчання, групування, багатозадачність.

Introduction. Multilevel teaching causes a lot of problems. In general, the literature on multilevel classes/groups reveals that these classes may have a negative effect on learners in that their participation and motivation are impacted. Nevertheless, there are researchers who look favourably on multilevel teaching. They claim it can enhance productivity of teaching process in general and the development of communicative competence in particular. The goal of the article lies in summarizing and outlining the major issues of the process and in defining teachers' challenges to face up to which a teacher is sure to meet students' needs in learning.

Methods of investigation. When conducting a literature review on the issue in question we came across the terms mixed-ability classes and multilevel classes. Their clarification was the point of our consideration.

Results and discussions. Most scholars describe mixed-ability classes as classes that have students with similar backgrounds, who are in the same grade, but are divided by their ability in a subject area (Tice, 1997: 87). In the sense, every English class can be mixed-ability. This is because each class consists of individuals who are different in terms of their knowledge and ability and have differences in language level. To specify, mixed-ability classes are classes in which there is a clear difference in language level among students. The level of their abilities in skills (receptive and productive), grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, pronunciation is meant. Besides these are classes in which there are differences in learning styles, speed and aptitude among students. Different levels of motivation are taken into account too. Moreover these are classes in which students have differences in the background knowledge, the knowledge of the world, their skills and talents in other areas. Some of these differences may be linked to age, sex, different levels of maturity, interests and so on. The term, multilevel

classes, is not used as frequently as mixed-ability classes to describe classes with students at different ability levels. They include students who communicate in English at a variety of different levels. They may also be thought multilevel because they contain students with different types of learning backgrounds. Students may also have different levels of literacy in their source language. A classroom that includes students who are familiar with the Roman alphabet and students who are not may also be considered multilevel (Hess, 2006: 92). Finally, the term multilevel can be used to refer to a group of students working together who range greatly in age (Hess, 2006: 96).

As all learners are different in proficiency, in general attitude towards language, and in learning styles, we may probably claim that most language classes are multileveled. Language classes tend to be heterogeneous too. That is, students in many classes are of different genders, maturity, occupations, ethnicities, cultural and economic backgrounds, as well as personalities. To conclude, the issues that make an English classroom "multilevel" are: the student's educational background in his/her first language, the student's comfort with the Roman alphabet, the cultural expectations each student has regarding the role of the teacher, the student's personality, the student's goals, the student's age, the student's learning style, the student's access to English outside the English classroom. Thus the term multilevel defines classes where learners with different levels, from beginning to advanced, are placed together in a single group.

Natalie Hess defines multilevel classes as the kinds of classes that have been roughly arranged, according to ability, or simply classes that have been arranged by age-group with no thought to language ability (Hess, 2006: 75). These are classes in which students vary considerably in their language and literacy skills and are in need of a great deal of personal attention and encouragement to make progress (Hess, 2006: 76).

Having compared both definitions we have found no fundamental differences. Their characteristics are similar. Actually these classes are alike and the terms ‘mixed-ability’ and ‘multilevel’ can be used interchangeably. The choice of the word ‘multilevel’ in our article is explained and confirmed by the term itself, the lexical unit ‘level’ in it, the predominance of which foregrounds the major issue in teaching – the sufficient communicative level that provides learners with the opportunity to produce their intentions and understand the intentions of others.

The analysis of the literature sources and our own teaching experience allow outlining the major challenges of multilevel classrooms: 1) determining the individual needs of each student; 2) ensuring that all students are motivated and interested; 3) organizing appropriate groupings within the class; 4) finding/working out appropriate graded tasks (multitasking), teaching resources and material.

Therefore to meet the teaching challenges in multilevel groups a teacher should carry out needs assessment to determine students’ motivation, learning styles, levels of ability/proficiency in English. Thus one of the first things a teacher should do when assigned to a multilevel classroom is to determine the needs of the individual members. Data are collected by a teacher from students in the form of interest surveys, learning style and multiple intelligence surveys, formative assessments, daily assignments and performances, summative assessments. This should be done before the first class.

Students’ motivation can be defined by testing, interviews, group discussions, and learner observations. It’s known the more specific student’s goals; the more motivated that student is to learn English. Some relevant tests can be found online.

Learning styles can be classified differently due to the certain criterion. According to the Neuro-linguistic programming they are described in the acronym “VAKOG” which stands for:

1. Visual (look and see) – visual learners tend to prefer reading and studying charts, drawings, and graphic information.

2. Auditory (hear and listen) – these learners are characterized by a preference for listening to lectures and audio texts.

3. Kinaesthetic (feel through movement) – these learners are right-brain dominant, they use both hemispheres of their brains simultaneously that is why they are acquiring the structures through actions.

4. Olfactory (smell things).

5. Gustatory (taste things) – in case of the latter two, nose and mouth are involved in the presentation of certain topics, it must be added that they have not

been explored in language teaching so far (Hamer, 2001: 361).

The other one is Multiple intelligences theory which is a concept introduced by Howard Gardner. In his book *Frames of Mind*, he suggests that as humans we do not possess a single intelligence, but a range of intelligences (Gardner, 2011:99). He lists seven of these:

1. Musical/Rhythmic – learners like singing, listening to music; they are good at remembering melodies, picking up sounds; they can learn language best by music, rhythm, and melody.

2. Verbal/Linguistic – left-brain dominant learners like reading, writing and telling stories; they are good at memorizing names, places, dates; they learn best by saying, hearing and seeing words.

3. Visual/Spatial – learners are similar to visual learners, they prefer drawing, looking at pictures, movies, and drawings; they are good at imagining things, reading maps, charts; they learn best by dreaming, visualizing, working with colours and pictures.

4. Bodily kinaesthetic – learners like moving around, touching and talking, using body language; they are good at physical activities such as dancing, sport, and acting; they learn best by processing knowledge through bodily sensations, touching, moving, interacting with space.

5. Logical/Mathematical – learners like doing experiments, figuring things out, working with numbers exploring patterns and relationships; they are good at maths, reasoning and problem solving; they learn best by categorising, classifying, working with abstract patterns.

6. Intra personal (introverted) – learners are the loners, they like learning alone, pursuing their own interests; they are good at understanding selves, focusing inward on feelings, goals, being original; they learn best by working alone individualised projects, self-paced instructions having their own spaces.

7. Interpersonal (extroverted) – learners (the socialisers) like having lots of friends, talking to people, joining groups; they are good at understanding people, leading others, organising, communicating, manipulating and mediating conflicts; they learn best by sharing, comparing, relating, cooperating, interviewing.

Keith Willing, working with adult students in Australia, produced the following descriptions:

1. Convergents: these are students who are by nature solitary; prefer to avoid groups, and who are independent and confident in their own abilities. Most importantly they are analytic and can impose their own structures on learning. They tend to be cool and pragmatic.

2. Conformists: these are students who prefer to emphasise learning “about language” over Learn-

ing to use it. They tend to be dependent on those in authority and are perfectly happy to work in non-communicative classrooms, doing what they are told. A classroom of conformists is one that prefers to see well-organised teachers.

3. Concrete learners: they are like conformists; they also enjoy the social aspects of learning and like to learn from direct experience. They are interested in language use and language as communication rather than language as a system. They enjoy games and group work in class.

4. Communicative learners: these are language use orientated. They are comfortable out of class and show a degree of confidence and a willingness to take risks. They are much more interested in social interaction with other speakers of the language than they are with the analysis of how a language works. They are perfectly happy to operate without the guidance of a teacher (Willing, 1987: 127).

Tests, interviews and observation are of great help to define learning styles.

The next step is to identify the levels of students' abilities/proficiency. Actually they are done due to the components of language competence (phonetics, lexis, grammar) and four communicative skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading). The placement tests work best.

Having analyzed the results achieved, we group our students according to the following levels of their abilities: above level, at level, below level.

The specific role of a teacher in multilevel classes is to orchestrate the pairing, grouping, and teaming-up of students. In the classroom, this process is especially important for the below-level and above-level students.

Grouping strategies are essential in a multilevel class. Teachers should determine when whole-class activities, group activities (three to ten students working together), teamwork (teams of students working together in competition with other teams), pair work, and individual work are appropriate. The use of grouping strategies is found to be an effective management tool in multilevel settings to provide efficient use of teacher and student time. Students can assist each other, and free a teacher to work with individuals or small groups (Hamer, 2001: 351). In addition, teachers determine when it is best to place learners in heterogeneous (cross-ability) groups and when it is best to place them in homogeneous (like-ability) groups. Like-ability is where students of the same proficiency level work together. The benefit of like-ability matching is that similar needs of the students can be addressed. Cross-ability is where students of different proficiency levels work together.

The benefit of cross-ability matching is that the higher-level students can help the lower-level students.

Teamwork is always a cross-ability grouping as is whole-class work, by its nature. With pair work and group work, however, teachers can decide, based upon a task, whether to match students by like-ability or cross-ability, as well as who to match with whom.

Another basis by which teachers may group students is their learning styles. Teachers can draw on multiple intelligences theory and others mentioned above to understand the different ways their students learn and show proficiency, and group students accordingly. There are factors that teachers also need to take into consideration when grouping learners in pairs or small groups. These are: the level of literacy and education in the native language, culture.

A teacher should bear in mind that due to different learning styles students progress at different rates. Thus there always be the stronger students who finish first. It is important for a teacher to have a range of strategies to deal with fast finishers. If a teacher makes use some of the options such as graded tasks, self access, different responses or open-ended activities, then he/she should have fewer problems with fast finishers. However, when the whole class is doing the same activity, there is likely to be a greater problem with students completing tasks at different times. Thus teachers should be aware of how to deal with the problem of fast finishers in classes. Such activities are proved to be successful: checking work (students may have error checklists to help them to do this), helping other students who have not finished yet (it fosters a sense of support and cooperation among learners), extension activities (to write some more questions, to do another task which asks students to react to the text in some way, etc.), additional exercises. Some course books have a special section of extra tasks for fast finishers and these are really helpful.

The next issue worth mentioning is multitasking. For grouping to be effective, teaching (tasks, materials) must be varied and made challenging to accommodate the learning needs of students with different levels of ability. Teachers can't do without graded (differentiated) tasks having learners with different levels of proficiency in English (Hamer, 2001: 239).

Differentiation is a strategy that presupposes teachers' response to their students' needs (Blaz, 2016: 175). Teachers can differentiate content, process, products, assessments, and the classroom environment, taking into consideration students' learning profiles, interests, and readiness levels. Actually it is a student-centred approach which is successfully carried out in teaching.

In all classrooms, effective teachers deal with three elements: content (what students learn); process (how students learn, the activities they use); and product (how students demonstrate the results of learning). These elements are basic in differentiating tasks.

Students work on the same material but with the tasks prepared by a teacher adjusted to different levels of difficulty. All students are challenged at an appropriate level of difficulty and get involved in doing the task. A teacher designs different tasks for lots of different activity types (e.g. speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary practice, grammar etc.). Besides he looks for and prepares different materials to practise different language items and skills according to students' needs. The teacher should develop a variety of worksheets to be used with diverse groups in multilevel class situations. It takes much of teacher's time. But multitasking provides students with motivation, allows them with different strengths, abilities in English, interests and knowledge of the world to succeed.

Tasks can be graded/differentiated by students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Blaz, 2016: 171). The typical graded tasks differentiated by readiness have such characteristics: from simple to complex, from structured to open-ended, from dependent to independent. Let's illustrate their application on the basis of the last characteristic. The development of independence falls into such stages:

1. Skill building (students develop the ability to make simple choices, follow through with short-term tasks, and use directions appropriately).

2. Structured independence (students make choices from teacher-generated options, follow prescribed time lines, and engage in self evaluation according to criteria to complete longer-term and more complex tasks).

3. Shared independence (students generate problems to be solved, design tasks, set time lines, and establish criteria for evaluation. The teacher helps and monitors the production process).

4. Self-guided independence (students plan, execute, and evaluate their own tasks, and seek help or feedback only when needed) (Tomlinson, 2010: 99).

The next important item in differentiation is interest. Multilevel groups operate on the premise that learning experiences are most effective when they are engaging, relevant, and interesting. Two powerful motivators for learning are student interest (why to learn) and student choice (what and how to learn). But in class they are different too. To create interests in students teachers provide them with tasks that:

1) help students realize that there is a match between educational institution and their own desires to learn;

2) demonstrate the connectedness between all learning;

3) use skills or ideas familiar to students as a bridge to ideas or skills less familiar to them;

4) enhance student motivation to learn.

The learning profile is taken into account while working out differentiated/graded tasks to fit learners too. There are four categories of learning-profile factors: a student's learning style, intelligence preference, gender, and culture.

1. Learning-style preferences. Learning style refers to environmental or personal factors. The goal of a teacher is to understand the great range of learning preferences that will exist in a group of students and to create a classroom flexible enough to invite individuals to work in ways they find most productive.

2. Intelligence preferences. Intelligence preference refers to the sorts of brain-based predispositions we all have for learning. Two researchers Howard Gardner (Gardner, 2011: 163) and Robert Sternberg (Sternberg, 1999: 296) proposed ways of thinking about intelligence preferences. R. Sternberg suggests that people have varying strengths in combinations of intelligences. They are analytic (schoolhouse intelligence, preference for learning in linear ways often typical of school), practical (contextual intelligence, preference for seeing how and why things work in the world as people actually use them), and creative (problem-solving intelligence, preference for making new connections, innovation).

3. Culture-influenced preferences. Culture affects learning, as well. It can influence how students express emotions, whether they value creativity or conformity, whether they are more reflective or more impulsive etc. Learning patterns may differ from one culture to another. Besides, there is learning variance within every culture.

4. Gender-based preferences. Gender influences how we learn too. It is known that more males than females prefer competitive learning. Such elements as expressiveness / reserve, group / individual orientation, analytic / creative or practical thinking coincide with those influenced by culture.

Conclusions. To sum up the teacher's major roles in multilevel groups are: a provider (provides the material), a guide (helps to look for, choose and find the necessary material), a monitor (ensures all students work and interfere to correct or help), a resource (is ready to answer students' questions). The advantages of learning in multilevel class are students can learn at their own pace, work in a group, become independent learners, and develop good relationships with their peers. Taking all the issues into account teachers can successfully meet the challenges in mul-

tilevel groups, create the atmosphere of collaboration and achieve the communicative goals of teaching. The future investigation presupposes practical application

of the issues: the elaboration of the sets of tests, tasks on the basis of students' needs assessment that will enhance their productivity in learning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Blaz D. *Differentiated Instructions: A Guide for World Language Teachers*. New York : Routledge, 2016. 194 p.
2. Gardner H. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York : Basic Books. 2011.
3. Hamer G. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. *Longman Handbooks for Language Teachers*. 2001. 384 p.
4. Hess N. *Teaching large multilevel classes*. NY : Cambridge University Press, 2006. 105 p.
5. Sternberg R. J. "The Theory of Successful Intelligence". *Review of General Psychology* 3. 1999. P. 292–316
6. Tice J. *The Mixed Ability Class*. Richmong : Publishing, London, 1997. 98 p.
7. Tomlinson C. A. *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms./ Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Alexandria. – USA ; Virginia. 2nd ed. 2010. 117 p.*
8. Willing K. *Learning Styles in Adult Migrant Education*. Sydney : NSW Adult Migrant Education Service, 1987.

REFERENCES

1. Blaz D. *Differentiated Instructions: A Guide for World Language Teachers*. *New York: Routledge*. 2016. 194 p.
2. Gardner H. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. *New York: Basic Books*. 2011.
3. Hamer G. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. *Longman Handbooks for Language Teachers*. 2001. 384 p.
4. Hess N. *Teaching large multilevel classes*. *NY: Cambridge University Press*. 2006. 105 p.
5. Sternberg R. J. "The Theory of Successful Intelligence." *Review of General Psychology* 3. 1999. P. 292–316
6. Tice J. *The Mixed Ability Class*. *Richmong : Publishing, London*. 1997. 98 p.
7. Tomlinson C. A. *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms./ Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Alexandria. – USA ; Virginia. 2nd ed. 2010. 117 p.*
8. Willing K. *Learning Styles in Adult Migrant Education*. *Sydney: NSW Adult Migrant Education Service*. 1987.