

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN MIXED-LEVEL GROUPS: CHALLENGES AND PRACTICAL METHODOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Teaching foreign languages in mixed-level groups is a common reality in many educational settings. In one classroom, teachers often work with learners who differ in language proficiency, learning pace, motivation, confidence, background knowledge, and communicative ability. Such diversity creates both challenges and opportunities. Lower-level learners may feel anxious or discouraged, while more advanced students may lose interest if the lesson does not challenge them enough. For this reason, traditional one-size-fits-all teaching is often ineffective in mixed-level language classrooms. This article discusses the main challenges of teaching foreign languages in mixed-level groups and offers practical methodological solutions based on modern educational research. It draws on differentiated instruction, sociocultural theory, scaffolding, task-based language teaching, flexible grouping, peer learning, formative assessment, feedback, and technology-supported learning. The article argues that mixed-level classrooms should not be treated only as a difficulty, but also as a productive space where learner diversity can be used as a resource for more inclusive and effective language teaching.

Keywords: Mixed-level classroom, mixed-ability classroom, foreign language teaching, differentiated instruction, scaffolding, task-based learning, peer learning, formative assessment.

Introduction

Аннотация

Преподавание иностранных языков в группах со смешанным уровнем владения языком является распространённой реальностью во многих образовательных контекстах. В одном учебном классе преподаватели нередко работают с обучающимися, которые различаются по уровню языковой подготовки, темпу усвоения материала, мотивации, уверенности в себе, объёму фоновых знаний и коммуникативным способностям. Такое разнообразие создаёт как определённые трудности, так и педагогические возможности. Обучающиеся с более низким уровнем владения языком могут испытывать тревожность или утрачивать мотивацию, тогда как более продвинутые студенты могут терять



интерес, если учебное занятие не содержит достаточного уровня интеллектуального и языкового вызова. По этой причине традиционный универсальный подход к обучению, ориентированный на всех учащихся одинаковым образом, часто оказывается неэффективным в языковых аудиториях со смешанным уровнем подготовки.

В данной статье рассматриваются основные трудности преподавания иностранных языков в разноуровневых группах и предлагаются практические методические решения, основанные на современных педагогических исследованиях. Работа опирается на принципы дифференцированного обучения, социокультурной теории, педагогического сопровождения / скаффолдинга, обучения на основе заданий, гибкого группирования, взаимного обучения, формирующего оценивания, обратной связи и обучения с использованием цифровых технологий. В статье утверждается, что разноуровневые языковые аудитории не следует рассматривать исключительно как проблему; напротив, они могут выступать продуктивным образовательным пространством, в котором разнообразие обучающихся используется как ресурс для более инклюзивного и эффективного преподавания иностранных языков.

Ключевые слова: разноуровневая группа, группа со смешанными способностями, преподавание иностранных языков, дифференцированное обучение, скаффолдинг, обучение на основе заданий, взаимное обучение, формирующее оценивание.

Introduction

In contemporary foreign language education, mixed-level classrooms are becoming increasingly common. In many groups, some learners already possess a solid vocabulary base and are able to communicate with relative confidence, while others still struggle with basic grammar, pronunciation, listening comprehension, or speaking fluency. These classrooms are often referred to as mixed-level, mixed-ability, mixed-proficiency, or heterogeneous language classrooms.

This issue is particularly important in foreign language teaching because language development does not happen in a straight line. Learners do not develop listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary at the same speed. A student may be accurate in grammar but hesitant in speaking; another may understand spoken language quite well but experience difficulties in writing. Therefore, teachers in mixed-level classrooms have to deal not only with different overall proficiency levels, but also with different strengths and weaknesses across language skills.

The main challenge is that a single method, a single textbook activity, or a single pace of instruction cannot respond equally well to all learners. If the lesson is too simple, stronger learners may become bored. If it is too difficult, weaker learners may feel lost and stop participating. As a result, the key methodological question is how to organize foreign language learning in a way that allows students with different proficiency levels to participate, progress, and feel included in the same classroom.

This article aims to examine the main challenges of teaching foreign languages in mixed-level groups and to suggest practical, research-informed solutions that teachers can apply in real classroom contexts.

Previous Research on Mixed-Level Language Classrooms

The problem of teaching learners with different ability levels has been widely discussed in both general education and language teaching methodology. One of the most relevant contributions comes from Carol Ann Tomlinson's work on differentiated instruction. In *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, Tomlinson explains that teachers working with academically diverse learners should take into account students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This idea is especially useful in mixed-level foreign language classrooms because it shows that teachers do not necessarily need to create a completely different lesson for every student. Instead, they can design one shared learning goal and provide different levels of task difficulty, support, and expected outcomes.

Another important theoretical foundation is Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. According to this view, learners are able to reach a higher level of performance when they receive appropriate support from a teacher or a more capable peer. This idea is highly relevant to mixed-level language classrooms because it supports the use of guided practice, peer assistance, collaboration, and gradual support. In such classrooms, lower-level learners can benefit from structured help, while stronger learners can deepen their understanding through explanation, interaction, and more extended language use. The concept of scaffolding is also closely connected with this discussion. Although it is often associated with Vygotsky's theory, the term "scaffolding" was developed more explicitly by Wood, Bruner, and Ross in their work on tutoring and problem solving. In language teaching, scaffolding refers to temporary support that helps learners complete a task until they are ready to do it more independently. This support may include model sentences, vocabulary lists, sentence starters, guided questions, visual materials, examples, or partially completed tasks. In mixed-level classrooms, scaffolding is particularly valuable because learners often need different degrees of support to succeed in the same communicative activity.

Task-Based Language Teaching also provides important methodological insights for mixed-level foreign language instruction. David Nunan defines pedagogical tasks as classroom activities in which learners understand, produce, manipulate, or interact in the target language while focusing mainly on meaning. This approach works well in heterogeneous groups because the same communicative task can be completed at different levels of linguistic complexity. For example, in a problem-solving or role-play activity, lower-level learners may use short phrases and simple sentences, while more advanced learners may negotiate, justify their opinions, and produce longer responses.

Rod Ellis also made significant contributions to task-based language learning and teaching. His work emphasizes the relationship between second language acquisition research, task design, classroom methodology, and assessment. Ellis's task-based perspective is useful for mixed-level classrooms because it allows teachers to organize learning around meaningful communication rather than around one fixed grammatical level. This makes it possible for



learners with different proficiency levels to take part in the same classroom activity according to their current ability.

Assessment is another important area in mixed-level classrooms. Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam's research on formative assessment shows that assessment should not only measure final achievement, but should also support learning through continuous feedback and adjustment of instruction. This is particularly important in mixed-proficiency language groups because students often begin from very different starting points. Therefore, teachers need to monitor individual progress, provide useful feedback, and adapt future instruction according to learners' needs.

Feedback also plays a central role in effective language teaching. Hattie and Timperley argue that feedback can strongly influence learning, but its effectiveness depends on how clearly and appropriately it is given. In mixed-level foreign language classes, feedback should be specific, supportive, and suitable for the learner's level. Lower-level learners may need simple and encouraging corrective feedback, while higher-level learners may benefit from more detailed comments on accuracy, fluency, vocabulary range, and organization of ideas.

Penny Ur's work in language teaching methodology is also relevant to this topic. Her books emphasize the practical complexity of real classroom teaching and the need for flexible techniques that help teachers manage learner diversity. In mixed-level foreign language classes, such techniques may include varied task difficulty, extension activities for stronger learners, additional support for weaker learners, flexible grouping, and careful classroom management. Overall, previous research suggests that mixed-level foreign language classrooms require flexible, learner-centered, and inclusive methodology. The works of Tomlinson, Vygotsky, Wood, Bruner and Ross, Nunan, Ellis, Black and Wiliam, Hattie and Timperley, and Ur all point to the importance of differentiated instruction, scaffolding, task-based learning, peer learning, formative assessment, and meaningful feedback.

Main Challenges in Mixed-Level Foreign Language Classes

One of the main challenges in mixed-level classrooms is the difference in students' readiness. Some learners understand instructions quickly and complete tasks independently, while others need more explanation, repetition, examples, and support. This can be difficult for the teacher, who has to decide how much time to spend on clarification without slowing down the progress of stronger learners.

Another common challenge is unequal participation. In speaking activities, stronger students often dominate discussions, while weaker students may remain silent because they are afraid of making mistakes. This limits the communicative value of the lesson for less confident learners. In foreign language classrooms, participation is especially important because students need regular opportunities to use the target language actively. Motivation is also a serious issue. Mixed-level groups can create psychological pressure. Lower-level learners may compare themselves with more advanced classmates and feel unsuccessful. At the same time, stronger learners may feel that the lesson does not offer enough challenge. If these emotional factors are not addressed, both groups may gradually lose motivation. Assessment can also become problematic. If the same criteria are applied to all learners without considering their starting



point, assessment may become unfair. A weaker learner who makes clear progress may still receive a low mark, while a stronger learner may receive a high mark with little effort. For this reason, assessment in mixed-level classrooms should consider not only final achievement, but also individual progress.

Finally, teachers often face practical difficulties related to time, materials, and classroom management. Preparing different tasks for different learners may seem demanding. However, modern teaching methodology offers several practical strategies that can make mixed-level teaching more manageable and effective.

Differentiated Instruction as a Core Solution

One of the most effective solutions for mixed-level language classrooms is differentiated instruction. Differentiation means adapting the content, process, product, or level of support according to learners' needs, readiness, and proficiency levels. It does not require the teacher to prepare a completely separate lesson for every student. Rather, it involves designing one common lesson objective and creating different pathways for learners to reach it. For example, if the lesson topic is "Travelling," all students can work with the same theme, but the tasks can vary in complexity. Beginner-level students may match travel vocabulary with pictures. Elementary students may complete short dialogues. Intermediate students may describe a travel experience. More advanced students may discuss the advantages and disadvantages of tourism. In this way, the whole group remains focused on the same topic, while each learner receives an appropriate level of challenge. Differentiation can be organized through three levels of tasks: basic, standard, and advanced. Basic tasks help lower-level learners understand key vocabulary and structures. Standard tasks allow most learners to practice the main language objective. Advanced tasks give stronger learners opportunities to analyze, express opinions, create longer texts, or solve communicative problems. This approach helps prevent weaker learners from feeling excluded and stronger learners from becoming bored.

Scaffolding: Supporting Learners Step by Step

Scaffolding is another essential strategy for teaching foreign languages in mixed-level groups. It means giving learners temporary support until they are able to complete a task more independently. In language teaching, scaffolding may include sentence starters, vocabulary banks, model dialogues, guided questions, visual prompts, examples, or partially completed texts. For instance, in a speaking lesson, lower-level learners can be given useful phrases such as "I think...", "In my opinion...", "I agree because...", or "Could you repeat that, please?" These expressions help them participate in communication even when their language level is limited. As students become more confident, the teacher can gradually reduce the support and encourage more independent language use. Scaffolding is especially useful because it reduces anxiety. Many learners in mixed-level groups do not remain silent because they have no ideas; they remain silent because they do not know how to express those ideas in the foreign language. By providing linguistic support, the teacher helps them take part in classroom interaction more confidently.



Flexible Grouping and Peer Learning

In mixed-level classrooms, grouping should be flexible rather than fixed. It is not always effective to use the same pairs or groups throughout the course. Sometimes stronger and weaker students should work together so that peer support can take place. At other times, students with similar levels should work together so that they can practice at a comfortable pace. For controlled grammar or vocabulary practice, mixed-level pairing can be useful because stronger learners can model correct language use. However, for freer speaking activities, same-level grouping may be more effective because students may feel less pressure and participate more equally. For project work, mixed-level teams can be useful because each learner can contribute according to his or her strengths. Peer learning should be organized carefully. Stronger students should not simply become “assistant teachers,” because they also need meaningful tasks that develop their own skills. For example, a stronger learner can be asked to ask follow-up questions, summarize the group’s opinion, extend the dialogue, or give constructive feedback. In this way, peer learning becomes useful for both stronger and weaker students.

Task-Based Language Teaching in Mixed-Level Groups

Task-Based Language Teaching is another practical approach for mixed-level foreign language classes. In this approach, students use the target language to complete meaningful, real-life tasks. The main advantage of task-based learning is that learners can participate in the same task at different levels of language production. For example, the teacher may give the task “Plan a weekend trip.” Lower-level learners can name places, means of transport, prices, and simple activities. Intermediate learners can make suggestions and explain the plan. Advanced learners can negotiate, justify choices, compare options, and present the final decision. The same task allows all students to participate, but the language they produce differs according to their level. Task-based learning also increases motivation because it connects language learning with real communication. Instead of only studying grammar rules, students use the language to solve problems, make decisions, and exchange ideas. This is especially valuable in heterogeneous classrooms where learners need meaningful reasons to communicate.

Learning Stations and Choice Boards

Learning stations are a practical classroom management technique for mixed-level groups. The teacher organizes several stations in the classroom, and students move from one station to another. For example, one station may focus on vocabulary, another on listening, another on speaking, another on writing, and another on teacher-guided support. This method allows the teacher to work closely with a small group of learners while others are engaged in independent or collaborative tasks. It is particularly useful in larger classes because it creates structure, movement, and variety. It also allows students to practice different language skills within the same lesson. Choice boards are another useful technique. A choice board offers students several task options related to the same topic. For example, after studying the topic “My Future Profession,” students may choose to write five sentences, create a dialogue, prepare a short presentation, make a vocabulary map, or write a short paragraph. Giving students choice



increases autonomy and allows them to select tasks that match their level, interest, and confidence.

Formative Assessment and Individual Progress

Assessment in mixed-level groups should not depend only on final results. Formative assessment is more effective because it helps the teacher monitor learning during the process. It may include short quizzes, exit tickets, self-assessment, peer feedback, learning diaries, observation checklists, or short reflective tasks. For example, at the end of a lesson, students may complete an exit ticket by answering three simple questions: “What did I learn today?”, “What was difficult for me?”, and “What do I need to practice more?” This gives the teacher useful information for planning the next lesson. Self-assessment is also important because it helps learners understand their own progress. In mixed-level groups, students should not only compare themselves with others. They should also compare their current performance with their previous performance. This develops motivation, responsibility, and a healthier attitude toward learning.

Technology-Supported Learning

Technology can provide valuable support in mixed-level foreign language classrooms. Digital tools allow teachers to assign different tasks to different learners without making the differences too visible. Vocabulary practice can be organized through Quizlet, short tests through Google Forms, interactive quizzes through Kahoot or Quizizz, and collaborative writing through Padlet or Google Docs. Technology also supports independent learning. Lower-level learners can repeat listening activities, review vocabulary, or watch short explanatory videos at their own pace. Stronger learners can complete extension tasks, read additional materials, or create digital presentations. In this way, technology helps personalize learning and reduce the limitations of classroom time. However, technology should not replace the teacher. It should be used as a tool for differentiation, feedback, and learner autonomy. The teacher remains responsible for choosing appropriate materials, monitoring progress, and guiding meaningful communication.

A Practical Methodological Model

Based on the discussion above, a practical model for teaching foreign languages in mixed-level groups may include six interconnected stages. First, the teacher conducts diagnostic assessment to identify students’ language levels, strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs. This can be done through a short test, interview, writing task, speaking activity, or classroom observation. Second, the teacher plans differentiated tasks based on one common lesson objective. The tasks may differ in complexity, but they should all lead toward the same general learning goal. Third, the teacher uses flexible grouping. Depending on the aim of the lesson, students may work in mixed-level pairs, same-level groups, or project-based teams. Fourth, the teacher provides scaffolding. Lower-level learners receive sentence starters, examples, vocabulary support, and guided practice, while higher-level learners receive more challenging and extended tasks. Fifth, the teacher encourages peer learning and collaborative activities. Students learn from one



another through pair work, group tasks, discussion, and feedback. Sixth, the teacher applies formative assessment to monitor progress and adjust future instruction. This makes the teaching process more responsive, fair, and learner-centered.

This model can be summarized as follows:



Conclusion

Teaching foreign languages in mixed-level groups is challenging, but it is also manageable and potentially productive. The main difficulty is that learners differ in proficiency, confidence, motivation, learning pace, and individual needs. Traditional uniform teaching methods often fail to respond to this diversity. Therefore, teachers need flexible, learner-centered, and inclusive methodological solutions.

The most effective approaches include differentiated instruction, scaffolding, flexible grouping, peer learning, task-based language teaching, learning stations, choice boards, formative assessment, meaningful feedback, and technology-supported learning. These strategies allow teachers to maintain a shared lesson objective while adapting tasks and support to different learners.

Mixed-level classrooms should not be viewed only as a problem. They can become rich learning environments if learner differences are used as a resource. Stronger students can develop leadership, communication, and analytical skills, while lower-level students can receive support, language models, and motivation from their peers. The teacher's role is to organize this diversity in a structured, purposeful, and supportive way.

In conclusion, the practical solution to teaching foreign languages in mixed-level groups is not to separate learners completely, but to create multiple learning pathways within one shared classroom. A well-designed mixed-level lesson gives every learner a realistic opportunity to participate, improve, and succeed according to his or her own level.

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