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Teaching a Large Multi-Level Class Using Different Strategies and Activities to Motivate English Language Learning

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Abstract

Many challenges face English language teachers today, but two common problems in Ecuador specifically in universities are large class sizes and multi-level students. These problems can create boredom, anxiety, and overall lack of interest in English language learning. It is shown in this article how to combat these particular problems through various strategies utilized to teach to the students' needs, help them work together and intrinsically motivate them to learn different English language skills, specifically grammar and sentence structure. These strategies include group work, task-based learning, the inverted or flipped classroom, role-play and intrinsic learning. The author explains how these strategies work in a specific group of university pupils in Ecuador to overcome these specific problems in a classroom, but without student participation they can be flawed.

Keywords: Multi-level, strategies, large class size.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is always arduous to have mixed ability or multi-level English language learners in the same class especially when the class size is considered large. This paper is focusing on how a teacher overcomes and deals with these problems in the Universidad Nacional de Educacion or UNAE in Azogues, Ecuador with a group of 30 students studying to be elementary school teachers. Other professionals such as Shank and Terrill (1995) have defined a multi-level class as a way of classifying how learning groups vary in multiple manners since all classes have different speeds and abilities when learning language skills. It is important to understand what a multi-level class is to be able to understand how to facilitate the problems and situations that emerge while teaching this type of course.

When a teacher is faced with this type of class they have to create activities and use strategies to keep students' interest, attention and motivate them to learn even when

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the curriculum is not at their specific level. When the topic being taught in the class is too difficult or too easy for students they tend to stop paying attention and lose interest, because the work is either not stimulating or too challenging. When addressing this issue a teacher must create activities and use strategies, which will not create chaos, boredom, and difficulties or lose the interest of the students. Some of the strategies discussed in this paper are group work, the inverted classroom, task based activities and the use of intrinsic motivation. It is important to consistently motivate the students to keep moving forward in the learning process utilizing strategies that best function for mixed ability classes.

1.1 Problems in the Classroom

This problem has repeatedly come up in English language classes taught by the author and is exacerbated by the large class size of teachers in training discussed in this paper. The ACTFL or The American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2010) states large class size does not work when teaching languages. Nevertheless, they do recommend that an appropriate class size for an effective teaching and learning environment is no more than 15 students; this is also agreed by the National Education Association (NEA) and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL) (ACTFL, 2010). According to McCarthy (2004), a large class makes it difficult to teach to student's needs, which is already a challenge facing the teacher in UNAE, because the students are not streamed or put into groups by levels of English.

This group should be placed in levels through the Common European Framework of References for Languages or the CEFR. According to the semester of study, they are currently in the group that should be at a higher A2 level, however only 7 students are actually at this level in the group. The majority or 16 students fall at a lower A2 level, 5 are at a B1 level and 2 are at a B2 level. Because of the various levels it is regular for some students to get bored and stop paying attention, while others feel lost because the content of the curriculum is too difficult so they ultimately stop participating in the class. It can be seen that all of the students who are studying to be teachers take English together regardless of their skill level. There are teacher trainees in each class ranging from beginner to advanced intermediate. This can create challenges for teachers to create engaging lessons with activities that spark interest and are at the correct level of all of the students in the class.

2. METHOD

To create consistent results for the lesson and creation of the lesson plan, various methods were used in this qualitative paper. The first method was a review of the syllabus for third semester of the English language in UNAE. The syllabus called for the passive voice to be taught in the last unit or last month of the semester as this is consistent with intermediate levels and the accepted curriculum. Therefore, it was necessary to find strategies to include all levels without overwhelming the lower level students, but still challenging the students who correlated with the level included in the curriculum of the syllabus. This is the reason the author chose to create various activities using strategies necessary to follow the syllabus of the university.

To apply strategies to assure all of the students in the class would be learning at their level the author interviewed other professors in the same field to discuss the lesson plan and dual lesson created for the large mixed level class. The academic peers of the author reviewed the syllabus and agreed with the strategies the author chose to tackle to problems encountered within the group. Once the author was confident with the plan that was made, the lesson was taught and at the end a question and answer session was completed to see if the students agreed with the strategies used by the author, who was the teacher herself. About 90% of the students verbalized that they were able to learn more, more interest in the subject and participated better when the material and strategies were directed towards their specific needs and levels. Then, 100% of the students felt more motivated to learn English when they were asked to participate in activities directly related to their careers. Finally, 10% of the students did not complete the independent activities at home and still had a difficult time with the in class activities. These students did not get the most out of the class because they did not complete their individual responsibilities. These methods utilized by the teacher are reflected in the results, discussion and conclusion of this paper.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To demonstrate the process, strategies and methods used in this paper, a lesson plan is provided by the teacher (see Table 1). This lesson plan was specifically created for a large mixed level university class. It contains the objectives, skills, methods, strategies, activities, outcomes and goals of the teacher. This lesson plan explicitly explains the following steps to teach a large mixed ability group of students to learn the passive voice and sentence structures.

3.1 The Lesson Plan

This TEFL lesson plan allows for the teacher to use various activities and strategies to teach a large mixed ability group of students to their personalized needs.

Table 1: TEFL lesson plan.

<i>Lesson Plan for Level 3 class in UNAE</i>	
Foreign language proficiency level :Lower Intermediate to Intermediate	
Language skill focus: Using the passive voice and writing sentences	
1) Language objectives:	
a. Listening: to peers discuss videos in groups and listen to peer presentations.	
b. Speaking: discuss with peers previously learned knowledge in groups and present new information to peers.	
c. Reading: read the worksheets provided by teacher.	
d. Writing: fill in the blanks, completion of worksheets and sentence writing.	
2) TEFL methods and strategies to be used:	
a. pairs and threes	
b. group work	
c. videos and technology (Video Links)	
d. flipped classroom	
e. tasked-based activities	
f. role-play	
g. presentations	

Table 1 continued...

3) Intrinsic motivation: combining common interests with the English language.
*4) Teacher input: a. provides activities and links for work at home. b. provides task-based activities and directions. c. reviews processes of group work. d. gives advice and guidance when necessary. e. guides student role play.
*5) Guided student practice: a. watching videos at home and completes work independently to gain understanding of new information. b. fills out and completes task-based activities. c. playing various roles in role-play activity. d. actively participating in class activities.
6) Group practice activity: a. completing level appropriate task-based activities b. role-plays of teacher and student.
7) Assessment: a. completed worksheets. b. discussion of videos. c. completion of role play using learned grammar, structure and language.
*8) Closing review and follow up: review of grammar and structure learned with entire class, a question and answer discussion about what they learned, what they know and what they still need to improve.

The lesson plan in Table 1 includes guided activities, independent work, group work, and assessment using multiple tools to address the problems that a teacher can face in this type of classroom. It shows the importance of creating a plan to address students' needs and teach the necessary curriculum to students, while motivating them to intrinsically learn the English language.

3.2 The Strategies Used

There are many different strategies an educator can choose to overcome the struggles of large class sizes and mixed levels. Mathews-Aydinli and Van Horne (2006) describe how it is important to know the needs and passions of the students to choose what strategies will work in the classroom, so the best strategies can be chosen to work with the particular situation. For this teacher's situation in UNAE group work, inverted classes, role play and task-based activities functioned the best due to the environment, curriculum and types of students the teacher was working with. When teaching other content or different age groups, particular strategies could be utilized depending on participants' needs and available tools, when encountering similar problems.

The teacher of this class has chosen to combat this situation using various multi-level teaching strategies. Specifically attempting to teach two different lessons of grammar, structure and vocabulary at the same time that ultimately connects the levels and unites the class so students can feel they are all learning the subject that is part of the curriculum to their individual needs. The content being taught in the lesson is the passive voice, which can be very difficult to understand and use in a proper context if students have a low level of English, meaning the action of writing active sentences can be a difficult enough task.

3.3 Group Work

To teach directly to the various needs of the students, the teacher puts them into different groups depending on their skill levels. This strategy is discussed by Treko (2013), who believes this is an integral part of teaching large classes with various levels of students. Group work also allows students to be more relaxed when speaking, since they only have to speak with a few people instead of the entire class. Another positive aspect of having students work in groups is that integrates of the class can help each other to understand the topic if one person has a better understanding than another. Group work is also important because it gives students an opportunity to work at their own pace and gain the necessary knowledge to complete the task given. Participants of this class worked in groups of 4-5 students to complete many of the activities presented through various strategies. They were put into groups depending on their levels of English, so they could complete tasks, which were challenging but manageable for the learner and connected to each of their needs. The model the teacher has chosen for grouping students has higher, more competent students completing more difficult activities, while beginner students are given easier tasks about similar topics simultaneously (Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

3.4 The Inverted or Flipped Classroom

The teacher goes onto to use the inverted or the flipped classroom strategy by having the groups introduced themselves to the new grammar topic through different assigned videos. The students were assigned different videos depending on the groups they were in, to watch at home to introduce themselves to the passive voice, types of sentences and sentence structure as homework. Using this strategy allows the students to watch the videos as many times as necessary for each individual, specifically to the students' needs. Through the use of differentiation, lower level students can watch the videos multiple times if necessary, while higher-level students may only need to watch it a few times. Weselby (2014) explains that part of the differentiation teaching method is grouping students together by ability. This ensures lower level students will have the opportunity to truly gain a better understanding of the new topics, while higher level students will not lose interest and get bored. The next day they were put into what Treko (2013) calls fixed groups based on ability because this can "save a lot of time in getting groups organized and started on a task (and) groups members get to know each other quickly and build a strong sense of group identity" (Treko, 2013, p. 245). In their groups they were to discuss what they learned and create either passive or active sentences as evidence of what they learned from the videos. These sentences were shared with the teacher and the class. The teacher's job in this class was not to explicitly teach the grammar points, but work as a guide by walking around and helping individual groups with any problems or questions that arose as they were creating evidences.

3.5 Task-Based Activities

The next step for students in the multi-level class was completing a task-based learning activity based on the previous knowledge learned. Task-based activities function well for multi-level groups because they allow for students to complete mixed

level activities to reinforce previously learned knowledge at the same time (Roberts, 2007). Two various activities were given to the different clusters of students, which were to be completed in class. These activities were a passive sentence writing activity and a worksheet with a short explanation of the passive voice to guide the students. The other activity was a sentence ordering activity to check the students' understanding of sentence structure and also to check the students understanding of different types of sentences commonly used in the English language. The students of both groups also produced the new English previously learned through circle discussions using the new grammar for the teacher to assess what they learned in a relaxed group setting.

Once the teacher was able to assess that the higher level students had a basic understanding of the passive voice through the task completed and the lower level students now understood how to write sentences through the work produced, the last assignments were given to the students to motivate the students to not lose interest and stimulate their individual abilities. The higher level groups were asked to prepare a short explanation of the passive voice and an activity to teach to the lower intermediate groups for the following class. The activity would show all of the knowledge they previously learned while requiring them to have an in-depth understanding of the material since they would have to teach it to the other students. The lower intermediate groups once again followed the structure of the inverted classroom, which helped as motivation to challenge them by watching the same videos previously viewed by the higher-level group at home. By completing this activity at home it allows for them to be able to repeat the videos as many times as necessary to gain an understanding of the grammar point, so they can participate in the following class. This repetition gave them the opportunity to learn at their own pace without the stress of being pushed too quickly.

3.6 Intrinsic Motivation

Throughout all of the activities, one of the goals of the teacher was to motivate the students. Karaoglu (2008) describes how motivation is necessary to language learning and it is one of the educators' jobs to attempt to connect language learning with what motivates the learner. Motivation or passion can be correlated with what drives a student. Being able to connect a lesson to incentives that can increase a student's appetite to learn is a key motivating factor (Karaoglu, 2008). For the group in this paper their passion is teaching, as they are all training and studying to be teachers. Thus, it is important to create activities that connect English language with their passion.

The following class began with the higher-level students peer tutoring the other groups and consequently teaching them how to use the grammar point. This group was not only learning a grammar point, but was able to practice their teaching skills at the same time. This allowed them to create an intrinsic connection with English and their chosen profession, which will hopefully prove to strengthen their English language abilities in the future. The teacher attempted to connect language learning with the student's passion for teaching to intrinsically motivate them. The goal of the teacher during this activity was to find out what the students connected to and ultimately wanted to learn, then use that to motivate the students by using these incentives inside the classroom (Karaoglu, 2008). The teacher used role play of teaching the other groups. This way they were able to connect their passion directly to learning English.

3.7 Role Play

Another important strategy used by the teacher to conclude the lesson was role-play. This is “an effective technique to animate the teaching and learning atmosphere, arouse the interests of learners, and make the language acquisition impressive” (Liu & Ding, 2009, p. 140). It was used by the upper intermediate groups to not only intrinsically connect them to English language learning, but also to express what they learned in an interactive process. The students were able to practice their chosen profession in an authentic manner through teaching the lower level groups the passive voice. While teaching they were able to express their individual understanding of the new information and use the new knowledge gained to teach the other students. The lower level groups also played a part in this role-play by acting as students in their peers’ classroom. By having their peers explain the new information they were able to be more relaxed and also use English in an authentic manner in groups formed by their peers. This helped them to utilize the new knowledge learned through various English language skills.

The activity the students went on to explain was about the passive voice and the lower level groups completed the task they created. This task also motivated the lower level students because it showed them they, too, are able to learn difficult skills when allowed the time, given the necessary skills to understand and ultimately able to move forward in the language learning process. Throughout this process the teacher listened to the content being taught to check for errors and used the tasks created by the students to make sure everyone could understand and subsequently use the new grammar point of passive voice.

This activity not only challenged the students but also motivated them to learn English. The student teachers were able to demonstrate their levels of English while providing a more comfortable learning environment for the lower level students. As Liu and Ding (2009) point out this can be intrinsically motivating for the group teaching the grammar point, because they were able to practice their teaching skills as well, since they are studying to become teachers. Liu and Ding (2009) support the claim that it is important to connect the role-play with real life and interests of the students.

3.8 Disadvantages of the Strategies and the Lesson Plan

While many of these strategies aid in solving the problems that arise when there is a large class size with multilevel students, there can be downfalls if the students do not complete the work assigned to them, have prior personal issues with each other or do not participate in the activities. Many of these activities depend on students willing participation and want to learn English. Without student involvement these strategies would be difficult to develop in a class.

3.8.1 Group Work

For each of these strategies there can be disadvantages or negative outcomes. When students work in groups it needs to be known before the groups are made that the people in the groups do not have any prior issues of working together. If the students have personal problems with each other, it makes it very difficult to work together to learn and create excellent work. It can also demotivate some people if they work with

others who they have personal obstacles to overcome, because they feel they cannot participate in the group like they otherwise would normally do.

3.8.2 Inverted or Flipped Classroom

This strategy is an excellent way for students to be able to learn at their own pace without feeling the stress of having limited time of being in the classroom. However this strategy can be problematic if students do not complete the task assigned to them outside of the class. Acedo (2013) explains that we must have confidence in our students to complete the work assigned to them. If this type of relationship does not exist and there is not trust, then this strategy can be difficult to use. In this instance, if the students do not watch the video or do not take enough time to understand the new information given to them, then they will not be able to participate in the class the following day. The teacher will have to reevaluate the activities based on the information that was supposed to be completed outside of class. The teacher could watch the videos in class or take the time to teach the information instead of completing the activities. This can create real obstacles for students' learning when they do not complete the activities assigned to them. This can be remedied if the teacher assigns work that must be completed along with the videos for a grade in the class and tries to motivate the students to realize the importance of learning outside of the classroom to really improve their English skills and also attempt to find an intrinsic connection to motivate them to complete the work outside of the classroom.

3.8.3 The Use of Multiple Strategies

When teaching a lesson it can be more difficult and more work for the teacher to create activities utilizing multiple strategies. Planning a lesson like the one in the paper can be very time consuming as well as requiring prior knowledge of how these strategies function to use them correctly to teach English language. These can be challenges the teacher must overcome to complete the tasks.

4. CONCLUSIONS

When the teacher is faced with the difficulties of a large class size and there are also students with mixed abilities, it is important to use various teaching strategies to attempt to teach to the many needs of the students, so they can learn the necessary content and language skills to move forward and improve in the learning process. The different strategies discussed in the paper show how they can help a teacher create an environment where students will not get bored, lose interest or misunderstand the topics as long as they complete the work assigned to them and participate in the class. Creating these types of lessons is more work for the educators, because they have to create two lesson plans for one class, but if it motivates the students to learn then it seems like a worthy hardship. The groups discussed in the paper are all studying for the same degree or to become teachers, thus it is important to create activities that connect to their major, which will intrinsically motivate these students to further their language learning and ultimately improve their English language skills.

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