

# TEACHING MULTILEVEL CLASSROOMS IN MOROCCO: THE CASE STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOLS IN MEKNES

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present research paper is to explore some of the teaching strategies that high school English language teachers in Morocco use to teach heterogeneous classrooms and to investigate whether teachers manage to fulfil students' needs through different levels. Teaching mixed ability classrooms is a huge area of research which needs a lot of research as the diversity of students, especially in terms of language proficiency levels, in English language classrooms is increasing.

The problem with teaching mixed ability classrooms is that teachers find it very difficult to serve every single student's needs. And even if they serve some students' needs, they would never manage to satisfy the needs of the rest of students. Therefore, high school English teachers from Meknes were assigned to fill out questionnaires. As the results showed, although high school English teachers know and use some effective strategies to teach mixed ability classrooms, they do not manage to successfully meet the needs of such classrooms due to many obstacles that hinder the teaching process.

**KEYWORDS:** - Multilevel Classrooms, Teaching Strategies, Differentiated Instruction, Grouping, and Lesson Planning.

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Research Article

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### Article Info

Received on: 03-02-2019

Revised on: 03-10-2019

Accepted on: 03-16-2019

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, it has been revealed that English language classrooms are diverse. Students come from different environments and happen to have different opportunities of learning and practicing English. They also have different, maybe cultural, perceptions towards the learning and the teaching processes. Therefore, English language students may have different levels even if they are in the same classroom. Classrooms with such students are referred to as heterogeneous, multilevel or mixed ability classrooms.

Heterogeneous classrooms are classrooms where we can find students with different levels. That is, in mixed ability classrooms, there are high level students, at level students, and low level students.

First, High level students are regarded to be high achievers as they perfectly and easily manage to engage in any instructed activities in the classroom. Second, at level students have an acceptable level of proficiency, though they always need the teacher's help, but they make some effort and help themselves out so that they can eventually do well. Third, low level students are considered to be slow learners as they find it very difficult to keep pace with other students. They always need more time and more explanation to understand the given tasks and activities.

These differences make the teaching process very challenging for teachers. That is, teachers should first identify the levels of their students so that they can opt for some teaching strategies that may help them serve each level's needs. Thus, multilevel classroom teachers may find themselves in charge of a very demanding mission because low and at level students need low and at level activities just as much as high achievers need advanced activities to make the learning process ongoing.

# 1. LEVELS OF MIXED ABILITY CLASSROOMS

The diversity of levels in mixed ability language classrooms has made it very necessary for trainers to give more attention to multilevel instruction while training teachers. For multilevel classroom teachers to find it very easy to, at least, try to adapt some teaching strategies and meet the students learning needs, they need first to identify their students' different levels. This first part will be exploring the three different levels of English classroom students and scholars' attitude towards these students. In multilevel classrooms, teachers are more likely to find students with high level, at level, and low level.

## 1.1 HIGH LEVEL STUDENTS

Students with high level are considered to be high flyers because they are quick to grasp the learned material. They perform very well inside the classroom and can accomplish whatsoever they are asked to do. Roberts (2007) refers to these students as "above-level". She says that these students may be more competent than students with at level, they can grasp in a very short time. However, Roberts (2007) states that "above-level students" can become noisy and disturbing while the teacher is busy helping other students. She also thinks that these students can get discouraged because the teacher is not giving more advanced instruction. This implies that though high level students are doing well inside the classroom, they may stop doing so if the teacher is not taking into consideration that these students also have needs to be fulfilled. Moreover, high level students are always ready to take risks and engage in any challenging activities. As it has been stated "... students in the higher tracks are exposed to "more complex and more difficult thinking and problem-solving tasks"" (Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992, p.583 Cited in Freedman, Delp, and Crawford, 2005, P.63). It has also been added that "Those in higher tracks also engage in more discussion and show greater growth" (Freedman et al, 2005, P.63).

## 1.2 AT LEVEL STUDENTS

These students are at an acceptable level of language proficiency. That is to say, they have to make some effort and they need the teacher's help, but they usually manage to do well. As Roberts pointed out: "These students are doing well with their current level of instruction and are progressing as they should" (Roberts, 2007.n.p). Hence, these students are, with the teacher's support, able to keep up with the instruction. Furthermore, though these students may encounter some difficulties with instruction, they rarely hesitate to take part in the classroom activities. It has been noted that "This student participates in most classroom activities and follows directions adequately, though with frequent misunderstandings" ("ESL Levels", n.d, Para. Level 3: Intermediate). As these students are progressing, their self-confidence is in progress as well. Therefore, this self-confidence pushes them to do their best and speak whenever they are given

The chance. To quote, “He/she may feel comfortable enough in the classroom to respond orally, despite frequent errors and incorrect word selection...He/she exhibits growing confidence in his/her ability to comprehend and respond in English” (“ESL Levels”, n.d, Para. Level 3: Intermediate).

## 1.3 LOW LEVEL STUDENTS

According to Roberts “These students are struggling to keep up with instruction. They need extra time to complete activities and are often dependent on peer support to be successful” (2007.n.p) Therefore, low level students are the struggling learners because they hardly understand the lessons. They need more time just to understand what they are supposed to do. Sometimes, even if they were given time, they would not manage to take part in the learning process. In addition to that, these students may be able to react only to the very simple instruction. As stated “those in the lower tracks are exposed to “less demanding topics and skills”” (Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992, p.583 cited in Freedman et al. 2005, P.63). Students who are at this level are not only struggling with their current level, but they also find themselves facing psychological problems. That is, they lose self-confidence due to their inability to keep pace with their classmates. To support this, Roberts (2007) wrote:

*These students may have feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem and are usually very cognizant of the fact that everyone else in class is learning more rapidly than they are. Below-level students are at risk because they often become frustrated and blame themselves for their inability to learn more efficiently. (n.p)*

These low self-esteem feelings imply that psychological problems can make low level students do nothing to help themselves out and reach their classmates. They even blame themselves for being still at this level. Hence, these students may start to worry about their future and to have bad perceptions towards their lives in general. This would, surely, prevent them from moving forward. Besides, it has been confirmed that “students in the lowest tracks have “the most negative views of themselves . . . academically and generally and the lowest expectations for their educational futures”” (Oakes, 1985, p. 143 cited in Freedman et al. 2005, P.63). Hence, it is for the teacher to stretch them further in order to be able to grow an intrinsic motivation towards learning English.

## 2. STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING MIXED ABILITY

This part attempts to explore and collect some teaching strategies that some teachers and professionals find very effective to teach multilevel classrooms. This part is going to be divided into two subsections; the first one is about some general instructional strategies that teachers may find useful to teach any content to multilevel learners. While the second one is about some specific strategies that teachers can use to teach reading, writing, speaking, and listening to multilevel classes.

### 2.1 GENERAL INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

#### 2.1.1 GROUPING STRATEGIES

It has been confirmed by many scholars that grouping strategies are the most effective strategies that work well in managing the teaching process in a multilevel classroom. As it has been stated, “The use of grouping strategies has been found to be an effective management tool in multilevel settings to provide efficient use of teacher and student time. Students can assist each other, which frees the teacher to work with individuals or small groups.” (CALPRO article on managing the multilevel classroom Cited in Roberts, 2007.n.p). Moreover, Cohen and Lotan (2014) claim that when students are given group tasks and opportunities to work hard and mistake things, they become self-reliant and responsible for their learning process as they feel free to complete their task in the way they think is the best. However, this does not mean that the teacher does nothing; he controls the learning process by evaluating the final product of the task and the process through which the students come up with the final work. According to Roberts (2007), there are four ways of grouping multilevel students; firstly, students can work as pairs. In pair work, two students work together on a specific task. Secondly, group work is when three to ten students work as a group to accomplish a task. Thirdly, students can be incorporated into teamwork. It is when students work as a team in a competitive way with other teams. Lastly, whole-class work is when the teacher makes all students engaged in an activity. To, deeply, explore these ways of grouping, it has been revealed that while grouping, it can either be students with the same levels working together or students with different levels working together. Roberts (2007) referred to these two ways as “cross-ability” and “like-ability”. She claims that the advantage of like-ability grouping is that the same needs can be targeted by the teacher. Roberts (2007) also believes that cross-ability grouping has a positive point which is high level students can help the low level ones. In addition to that, Pospíšilová (2008) has seen the benefit of like-ability grouping in a different way. She claims that students working in like-ability groups feel at ease not working with anyone better than them. Therefore, it has become very obvious that “teachers should determine when it is best to place learners in heterogeneous groups ....and when it is best to place learners in homogeneous groups” (Aydinli & Horne, 2006.n.p).

## 2.1.2 LESSON PLANNING STAGES

Lesson plan is where the teacher should take into consideration the students' different levels while preparing it. Grouping strategies are also taken into accounts while preparing lesson plans. As it has been written "Teachers can prepare parallel lessons for learners at different levels. Planning should include strategies for managing a variety of group, pair, and individual activities" (Shank & Terrill, 1995 Cited in Aydinli & Horne, 2006.n.p). Roberts (2007) has provided an effective structure of a lesson plan that works for multilevel classrooms. This lesson plan is divided into three stages that can a teacher go through while teaching mixed ability classes. The first stage is, as Roberts (2007) refers to, begin the lesson with the whole class together. She claims that beginning instruction with the whole class together provides a platform for the differentiated instruction that will smoothly follow. The second stage is assigning leveled tasks using different grouping strategies. As the instruction is progressing, tasks are leveled according to the students' levels. This implies that the leveled tasks "can be varied to suit the skill levels and interests of the learner: one person might order a single item, like a hat, while another might take on the very challenging task of measuring windows and ordering curtains of the correct size (who among us has not been challenged by that task?)" (Cowels, 1997). The last stage is ending the instruction with the whole class together. As it has been put "In the application stage of your lesson, bring the whole class back together for review and to assign a whole-class activity" (Roberts, 2007.n.p).

## 2.2 STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING THE FOUR SKILLS

### 2.2.1 TEACHING THE PRODUCTIVE SKILLS

Teaching writing and speaking can be very demanding, especially when it comes to teaching multilevel classrooms because the teacher has to bear the students' mixed levels in mind while preparing extra activities. Pospíšilová (2008) has pointed out that the kind of activities that are used and suit teaching writing and speaking are open-ended activities. These activities are "those where the outcome varies from a student to student, pair to pair or a group to group. The task might be to discuss a controversial issue and provide reasons supporting one's opinions or writing an anecdote, essay, letter etc" (Pospíšilová, 2008,p.23). Moreover, activities that are used to teach writing and speaking can also be leveled according to the students' levels. On one hand, to Roberts (2007), leveling writing activities can be applied by providing students with a model before asking them to change the information with their own. In addition to that, dictation activities can also be used and leveled according to each level. As it has been stated "I might dictate from a dialogue.

We had just practiced, giving the below-level students the option of keeping their books open. Or I might dictate from a vocabulary list, and the below-level students would write only the vocabulary word, while the at-level and above-level students would write the whole sentence” (Roberts, 2007). Roberts also believes that writing activities can be finished with the whole class together. As the high level students finish, they can help the low level students complete their tasks. Leveling speaking activities, on the other hand, can go smoothly in the way Roberts puts it. She claims that the teacher can create a conversation and have the low level students practice only the first part, the at level students practice the whole conversation, and the high level students practice the whole conversation and come up with new expressions.

## 2.2.2 TEACHING THE RECEPTIVE SKILLS

Teaching reading and listening is very important in a language learning classroom because students can never improve their productive skills without enhancing the receptive skills. In a multilevel classroom, the teacher finds himself obliged to prepare extra leveled activities. It has been suggested that “closed activities are those where the possibilities of outcome are limited (closed) to one correct answer. An example of such an activity might be cloze tests or marking statements based on a reading or listening exercise true or false. They are usually connected with receptive skills, i.e. reading and listening”(Pospíšilová, 2008, p.23). Moreover, Roberts (2007) believes that listening is very difficult for all levels. Therefore, she suggested a step-by-step strategy that every student can follow. The strategy goes as the following: Firstly, the teacher has to revise with students the task which they have to complete after the listening activity. Secondly, students close their eyes and listen to the audio recording. Thirdly, students listen again looking at the task which they have to complete. Fourthly, students listen again and try to complete the task. Fifthly, students listen one more time and revise what they have done. Sixthly, students compare their answers with the answers of their partners. Lastly, students listen for the last time and the teacher stops the audio to revise each answer with the whole class together. In addition, Moreno (2015) has also cited some different tips to differentiated instruction; instructors have to "provide listeners with the background information needed to understand the message before asking students to listen to a segment of discourse" (Dunkel, 1986, p. 101). Moreover, as it was suggested by Oxford (1993) and cited in Moreno (2015), pre-listening exercises are very helpful for students to get the goal of the activity. Brainstorming and talking about the topic and its vocabulary are examples of these exercises.

This implies that, for example, reading and listening activities can be limited to true or false and explicit information questions for the low and at level students while challenging questions and tasks can be given to high level students. Hence, the teacher has to be very careful while preparing activities to teach these skills because they are the cornerstone of English learning process.

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### 3. Research Methodology

This section is dedicated to describe the methodology that this research paper went through and the way the current study was approached to be applied to the case study. This part is divided into three major subsections. The first subsection will deal with the data collection process. The second one will tackle the sampling (case study). Then the third one will cover the instrument that was used in data collection. The last subsection will describe the way data were analyzed and organized.

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### 3.1 Data Collection Process

Data collection process is the process through which the researcher collects and gathers information needed for his or her research paper. As far as research procedures are concerned, data collection is an essential process which enables the researcher to investigate and analyze answers in order to come up with reliable results and recommendations. Therefore, the data should be as exact and honest as possible.

Data collection process of the present study took place in Meknes city because it was convenient for me and it has enough high schools for the sampling needs. Data were collected through many stages; a permission paper was signed by the English department administration and taken to the high schools. The questionnaires were distributed according to each high school's number of English teachers. Some of the questionnaires were distributed at the morning break, 10 am, and some were distributed at the afternoon break, 04 pm, because it was only then when all teachers could be found in the teachers' room. Teachers were given enough time to fill in the questionnaire and that is why the data collection process took two weeks.

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### 3.2 Population Sampling

The process of the selection of the participants ended up covering around fourteen high schools: Ibn Roumi, Royal Military Academy, Oued Al Makhazine, Ibn Al Baytar, Ibn Al Haytham, Tarik Ibn Ziad, Mohammed V, Zitoun, Moulay Youssef, Al Massira, Imam El Ghazali, Imam Ali, Princess Lalla Amina, and Badr High Schools with about forty one high school English teachers. Around 56% of them were females and only 44% were males. The sampling of the current study focused mainly on high school English teachers who happen to teach first baccalaureate classes. The sampling did not focus on second baccalaureate classrooms because 2nd bac students are to take a national exam at the end of the academic year and teachers find themselves obliged to stick only to the textbook. Common core classrooms were also not the focus of the sampling because students at this level are at their beginning stage and are not yet to be classified as high, at, or low level learners. Therefore, first baccalaureate classroom teachers were the most suitable sampling for the current study.



### 3.3 Instruments

The aim of this study is to collect some teaching strategies that high schools English teachers use and find effective to teach multilevel classrooms. Therefore, this makes the present research paper a quantitative one which needs a quantitative device. The device which is usually used in the quantitative research is the questionnaire. The questionnaire which was used in this study is made up of six major parts. The first part is the demographic part. The second one is about some general instructional strategies. The last four parts are about the teaching strategies that teachers use while teaching writing, speaking, listening, and reading. Most of the questionnaire questions were transformed from the teaching strategies that were discussed in the literature review and put as multiple choices. Teachers were provided with a free space at the end of the questionnaire for any additional thoughts or comments.

## 4. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

This part tends to discuss the results of the study and to give answers to the three research questions. Therefore, this part is mainly about answering the research questions, which are as the following: How do high school English language teachers deal with mixed ability classrooms in Morocco? What are some of the suggested effective strategies that multilevel classroom teachers resort to teach writing, speaking, reading, and listening skills? To what extent do high school English teachers manage to fulfill the needs of each student's level?

1. How Do High School English Language Teachers Deal with Mixed Ability Classrooms in Morocco?

This question aims at investigating the general instructional strategies that Moroccan high school English language teachers use and find effective to teach mixed ability classes. The general instructional strategies that teachers were given to choose from were taken from the strategies that were cited in the literature review. Hence, some of the strategies that teachers have chosen were suggested and found effective by scholars and professionals. Grouping strategies, on one hand, are regarded to be the most effective strategies in teaching mixed ability classes. Teachers were firstly asked whether they use group work or not. As a result, 67% of the participating teachers believe that mixed ability classroom students learn best when they are grouped and paired. However, there are some teachers who do not find grouping effective

Effective claiming that time does not allow it. They rather opt for the individual work because they believe that each student has his own style of learning. Furthermore, teachers who use grouping were asked whether they use like-ability or cross-ability grouping. It turned out that 90% of them use mixed ability grouping because through this type of grouping, low level students learn from high achievers. Teachers who use like-ability grouping are few but they exist and they claim that it is unfair for weak students to be grouped with high level ones. They also believe that students have to learn at their own pace.

On the other hand, lesson plan stages are highly recommended to be carefully prepared and applied to mixed ability classrooms as a strategy. Lesson plan stages structure that Roberts (2007) suggested were given to teachers to choose from. This structure has three stages: to begin the lesson with the whole class, then assign leveled tasks, then to end the lesson with the whole class together. Therefore, it has been revealed that 80% of teacher use and find this structure effective while only 20% of them begin and end the lesson with assigning leveled tasks.

2. What are some of the suggested effective strategies that multilevel classroom teachers resort to teach writing, speaking, reading, and listening skills?

This question tends to be more specific as it aims to explore some strategies that Moroccan high school English language classrooms resort while teaching writing, speaking, reading, and listening skills. Firstly, teachers were asked whether they prepare mixed level texts for their mixed ability classrooms or they only rely on the texts in the

The textbook. It was found out that 52% of them use only texts that are in the textbook claiming that it saves time as everyone has the textbook.

However, few are teachers who use texts in the textbook in addition to some challenging prepared mixed level texts. Secondly, in the listening skills section, it has been found that 83% teachers bear in mind their students' mixed levels while preparing listening tasks. It has also been revealed that 62% of teachers provide their students with background information needed to understand the message before asking students to listen. 27% of them use activities that focus on the topic before asking students to listen. While 11% of them prefer to allow students time to process the new information before the task.

Thirdly, this study found that while preparing topics for writing skills teaching, almost all teachers consider their mixed level classroom needs. Moreover, some teachers prefer to use competitive and cooperative activities while teaching writing skills because student can compete and learn from each other. While some opt for individual activities claiming that each student should be responsible for his work. In this section, most teachers prefer to include all students in one activity. While only some of them use like-ability and cross-ability grouping. Lastly, when it comes to teaching speaking skills, it has been found that all teachers give chance to low level students to speak by setting examples for them to repeat. Moreover, high level students are also given chance to speak and express themselves by asking them to do project work, presentations, and role playing. However, there are some teachers who do not give chance

Chance to high level students to speak claiming that it takes a lot of time. In this section, almost all teachers opt for mixed ability grouping.

3. To what extent do high school English teachers manage to fulfill the needs of each student's level?

This question tends to find out whether high school English teachers manage to meet the needs of their mixed ability classrooms. For this reason, it is necessary to explore some results to end up with a clear image of the way the teaching process goes. For a mixed ability classroom teacher to manage to teach such classrooms, he should first discover that his classroom is multilevel by assessing his students' level. In this context, the results of this study show that 98% of teachers assess their students' level to identify their levels. Furthermore, the teacher's role is also one of the key elements in teaching multilevel classrooms. Hence, it has been found that most of participating teachers supervise their students and keep assisting them at every single stage.

However, teachers may encounter many problems while teaching multilevel classrooms. The results of this study show that 54% of teachers have difficulties in teaching mixed ability classrooms. Some of these problems are time management, involving everybody, the unwillingness of some students to learn, negative impact of weak students on high level ones, over-crowded classes, providing different level activities...etc. Furthermore, it has also been revealed that most of teachers find teaching writing skills to mixed ability classrooms difficult because there are some students who lack vocabulary and are reluctant to write. While some other teachers find difficulties in teaching listening, speaking, and reading because many reasons such as lack of electronic materials, unmotivated students, unfamiliarity with the language, time management...etc.

It can be concluded that although the teacher identifies the mixed levels of his students by assessing their levels, supervises them, and uses some effective strategies while teaching mixed ability classes, the above-mentioned problems and difficulties may hinder the process of teaching. Therefore, this discussion implies that teachers, with reservation, do not manage to one hundred percent fulfill the needs of each student's level because of the problems that were discussed above. Mixed ability classroom teachers, then, may fail to successfully serve the needs of such classrooms due to either pedagogical difficulties such as the use of strategies, training limitations, less knowledge about the way mixed ability classrooms should be taught...etc. or some other difficulties like the lack of teaching materials, the time devoted to each level, and the students' unwillingness to learn.

## CONCLUSION

This research paper is under the theme of teaching heterogeneous classrooms in Morocco. This area of research has become very important and needs much research because English language classrooms are going diverse in terms of the students' level due to the many available opportunities of learning and enhancing the language outside the classroom. That is to say, mixed ability teachers should be careful when teaching this kind of classes in order to manage to meet all students' levels. Therefore, the present study tends to explore the various teaching strategies that Moroccan high school English language teachers use to teach mixed ability classrooms and to see whether they manage to fulfill the needs of such classrooms.

The theoretical part has explored the different levels that mixed ability classroom students may be and the problems that these students may face. Moreover, literature review has also explored some general teaching strategies that professionals have applied to their mixed ability classrooms and found very effective to teach such classrooms. Furthermore, the very last part in the theoretical part is about some specific teaching strategies that mixed ability classroom teachers use to teach speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills.

The aim of the practical part is to investigate how high school English teacher deal with mixed ability classrooms. The sampling of this study covers forty one teachers who teach in Meknes city. The questionnaire which was distributed to teachers to fill in had questions that were based on the strategies that were discussed in the literature review. As far as the results of the study are concerned, high school English teachers are aware of the differentiated instructional pedagogy. They also use some effective teaching strategies to teach mixed ability classrooms. However, the mixed ability classroom teaching process is being hindered by many problems that make teachers not to manage to teach such classrooms and meet the needs of every student's level.

## 1. Limitations of the Study

This research paper has encountered many limitations from its very beginning until the end. Firstly, this study was limited to time. That is, it was conducted in a period of three months, which is never enough to conduct a research. Secondly, this paper was also limited to the lack of references. Rare are the references which focus only on teaching speaking, listening, reading, or writing skills. And even if they were, they were not available to everyone. Thirdly, one of the limitations that this study has is that some teachers were not willing to help and fill in the questionnaire. There were some teachers who refused to fill in the questionnaire claiming that they had no time. Lastly, this study was also limited only to high school teachers who teach in Meknes city. It did not cover any high school teachers who teach somewhere else in Morocco.

## 2. Implications of the Study

The aim of conducting this study is to explore the teaching strategies that high school teachers use to teach mixed ability classrooms and the problems that they may encounter while trying to meet the needs of the students. The results have shown that many teachers rely on the textbook to teach mixed ability classroom. Therefore, further research should be done investigating the content of the textbooks so that textbook designers can ensure that textbook's content is multilevel and can help the teacher teach mixed ability classrooms. Furthermore, many teachers have highlighted the issue of time management in teaching multilevel classes. They claim that one hour is never enough to satisfy each student's level. Therefore, it is highly recommended that the time devoted to each grade should be reconsidered. Finally, further research is also needed to investigate the training that teachers go through in order to find out whether this training gives more attention to teaching mixed ability classrooms and the creative strategies that teachers can resort to manage to successfully teach such classrooms.

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