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Towards better results with mixed-proficiency classes: use of flexible tasks

secondary and adult

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1. Introduction

It is nowadays increasingly taken for granted that a swim-or-sink, the-same-everything-for-everyone approach in education will tend needlessly to fail a large proportion of learners. So, a hard question arises-how, in class of a dozen or more learners can their various needs be well enough addressed? Or, in the narrower version that so preoccupies modern language teachers-How can we effectively teach students who are at widely different levels of proficiency and, very likely, aptitude?

Let's look at basic options.

2. Radically individually tailored teaching

'Differentiation' is a jargon term I recently learned from a UK state school teacher talking on the radio. It refers to the practice of consistently having different students doing very different things at the same time. Legend has it that, in the good old days, an Oxbridge don with just a few students to closely oversee could sometimes choose this option if so inclined. *Pro*: If your class is indeed very diverse in level of English (I won't get into all the other ways in which a class can be diverse), this option is the only one which offers, in principle, the hope of addressing in detail the needs of students of quite different levels. *Con*: The more students you have, the more problematic this option becomes, a fact that will be particularly stark if students' motivation and discipline depart much from the ideal and if you lack frequent access to self-study facilities of a good standard.

3. Materials-oriented differentiation

A less ambitious version of differentiation, very roughly summarized, consists in the general practice of having students do different worksheets even when they are engaged in the same broad task. *Pro*: You would have some chance of

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upholding this practice in a class of 20 or so. *Cons:* You would need to:

1. do extra preparation (This is true even if someone else—e.g., a materials producer—has done a good deal of the preparation for you since, at the very least, you have to study it all in order to see what it is, how to use it, whether it is suitable to this or that student in your class, whether you can or need to adapt it, and how to adapt it.)
2. spend more time marshalling of materials at the time of the class (You will have to collect the materials, lug them to your classroom, arrange them so you know what is what, hand them out to the right students, collect them in some kind of order so you can deal with them efficiently later on. Plus, you may well fall foul of Murphy's sub-Law of Handouts: the farther you classroom is from the photocopier or resources room, the more likely it is that you will have failed to bring all of them to your classroom.)
3. spend more time giving instructions (Your worksheets may have the best conceivable instructions but, as any experienced teacher is likely to attest, additional instructions will usually be required. Further, it is an inescapable classroom fact that the more separate instructions you have to give, the more likely it is that students will get mixed up about who is supposed to do what.)
4. spend more time giving feedback (because the less common ground there is among students' tasks, the less for-the-whole class feedback there can be.)

This is a rather daunting list; and on top of it the question hovers, How many different worksheets should you have for a given task? If two, why not three? If three, why not four? Because the thing is, if you have 25 students, you can't automatically assume you have just two, or three, or four levels of proficiency (and anyway, students who, for instance, are of similar proficiency in reading may have very different proficiencies in some other area such as listening). Plainly, any low number of different worksheets that you choose is liable to be arbitrary while any high number will be impractical.

4. Inflexible tasks

There are two especially common sources of inflexibility in a task:

- The task focuses on a specific language point (e.g., single grammar point) or a small set of such points. Thus, some students may already know the point(s) or find it (or them) very easy. Other students though may find the point(s) or something else about the task just too difficult to even start with. Students in both sets are likely to become de-motivated if they are too often presented with tasks of this sort.
- The task involves prolonged focus on a single written or recorded text (or set of texts). The most frequently drawback of this is that some students may hardly understand the text at all while others, your most proficient students, may believe that there is nothing new for them in the text at all.

Typical inflexible tasks are repetition drills, there-is-just-one-answer!-fill-in-the-blank exercises, and standard dictations. The inflexibility of these (and certain other) common types of task stems from their requirement that students produce words, expressions, or passages which are wholly or substantially fixed in advance by you or whatever materials writer you are relying on. An additional (but linked) fact about inflexible tasks is that they typically have a relatively small and/or easily listable set of aims. This is a matter I will come back to in the Conclusion.

5. Flexible tasks

Tasks that are *flexible* tend to have a very broad range of aims, many of which only potentially rather than (ostensibly) certainly come into play. The key desideratum concerning task flexibility is that some of the aims (but perhaps not all of them) should be achievable even by the lowest level learners in your class.

A flexible activity will have one or more of the following features as well:

1. Choice: Students will be given a choice among sub-tasks; e.g., students get a list of questions from which they can each choose which ones their partner should ask them.
2. Quantity: The amount of language that students are asked to produce or process can vary. A corollary of this point is that *partial completion is OK*. That is, students who do less of a (sub-)task than other students do can still participate in later stages of the task sequence. E.g., The old activity 'Find someone who ...?' which, although otherwise not outstandingly flexible, is flexible in that students can still usefully participate in the concluding report-to-the-class phase even if they have only managed to ask their question(s) to one person during the preceding mingling and interviewing stage.
3. Sophistication: The task can be successfully done at different levels of linguistic or intellectual complexity. For example, one student may produce simple sentences which express mundane ideas; a second student, also in simple sentences, may express unusual or even profound ideas; a third may use much more complex language to communicate thoughts complex or simple as the case may be. An example: In three minutes everyone writes some true sentences containing the words *in, tomorrow, my, hope, the, moon, five*. following these rules: Each sentence must contain at least one of the words given. The maximum number of sentences is 12. (The rationale is that this gives the more proficient students a clear but high target.)
4. Roles of different difficulty: Some activities, role plays for instance, can be designed so that one role is inherently more challenging than the other(s). A simple example is that of an in-role interview in which a lower proficiency student (a 'novelist' researching the criminal mind') asks questions given on a handout while the interviewee (a 'notorious desperado') relies, in answering, entirely on her or his own experience and/or imagination.
5. Help from classmates: Try to include in most of your activities at least some way that weaker students to get help from ones who know more. A simple example: In a

dictation, after each sentence or two ask a student who you see has written things down correctly to read it all out from the beginning (Hopefully, you can choose a different student to read out each time.)

To elaborate a bit from what was said at the beginning of this section, the *underlying* desiderata of a flexible task are constant:

- Both low and high proficiency students should be able to carry out (some part of) a task.
- They should be able to do so at different levels of ambition.
- Everyone should have a good opportunity to learn something worthwhile; it just needs to be borne in mind that what is learned will generally be different for each student.

6. A more detailed example

The task now to be described is a variation of the 'superlatives' questionnaire on pages 16 and 17 of John Morgan and Mario Rinvulcri's *The Q-Book* (originally Longman, 1988, re-published in March 2004 by ELB Publishing):

1. Form pairs and give everyone the same version of a longish questionnaire. The one just mentioned has 20 questions on it (e.g., *What is the smallest thing you have ever bought?*, *When has your hair been the longest?*, *If you were to burgle your own house, which three things would you take?*).
2. Ask everyone to choose and mark a few questions-the questions which they could give interesting answers to.
3. On the board, write some probing questions-e.g., *Why?* *Can you tell me more about...?* and so on.
4. Explain that-
 - Partners will soon swap papers.
 - Partner A should ask B the questions that B marked and then B should ask A the questions that A marked.
 - Questioners should make use of probing questions such as the ones on the board.
5. Start them off.
6. Ask any early finisher to write a couple of sentences that their partner said.
7. Bring the class together and ask your students to tell you some interesting things they learned about their partners.

How is this kind of questionnaire task flexible?

- Learners have a choice among questions.
- Any particular student may say a lot or a little, may use simple or complex language and may try to express mundane or profound thoughts.

- The activity can still work even if students do not choose the same number of questions to answer or if they don't answer them at the same length.
- There is a sub-task for early finishers.
- There is potential opportunity for each student to get help from their partner.

But like most flexible activities, this one is not flexible in every conceivable way—at least not in the version just given. Specifically, the roles that students have are all basically the same. But the activity could be changed a bit so that this criterion of flexibility is also met:

New version of the questionnaire task:

1. Ask everyone to tell you, on a scale of 1 to 10, how talkative they feel. (Let us say that 10 is top.) Note on the board who gives themselves what number.
2. Choose the half of your students who gave themselves high numbers and tell them to stand together.
3. Tell them each to choose one of the sitting students as a partner and sit together.
4. Hand out the questionnaires and tell everyone to circle five questions that interest them.
5. Ask the *nontalkative* (i.e., low-number) person in each pair to take their partner's paper. (Thus, each nontalkative student has two sheets of paper.)
6. In each pair, the nontalkative student interviews the talkative one by asking the questions that have been circled and then, if there is still time, some of the other questions.

(It is typically the least proficient, least motivated students who give themselves low numbers so the rationale in the above version of the task then is that one role is more challenging than the other—i.e., that of *answering* the questions. However, if...as in the first version of this task...you encourage probing questions, then even the students with the ostensibly easier roles can make more of them if they so wish.)

7. Additional guidelines about mixed-level teaching

Briefly, a few other things to bear in mind if you're working with a mixed-level class:

1. Make your own talk more comprehensible by paraphrasing more than usual. Doing so can enable you to make your own classroom talk richer, which will be good for your higher level students, and help to ensure that your lower-proficiency students can also follow what you say. For the same reason (i.e., since they can make what you say more comprehensible to your less proficient students in particular), consider whether you make enough use of pictures, gesture, mime, and props.
2. Build up a mental repertory of jobs you can give early finishers. (This is potentially the subject of an article in itself. Take my word for it just now that there are lots of simple ways of keeping fast finishers fruitfully engaged till others are ready too.)

3. To make your lessons generally more interesting to students of all levels, make it a common practice to incorporate into your lessons...
 - a good deal of personalization (as in the 'superlatives' questionnaire)
 - opportunities for creative expression
 - opportunities for students to share ideas and hear what each other have put down on paper. (This is true not solely of creative writing activities-but this too is a long story, something for another time.)
 - a sprinkling of non-linguistic challenges such as drawing something, solving puzzles, or performing mnemonic feats. (Such non-linguistic tasks are important because, among other things, they can give your not-so-good language learners the opportunity to do best in *something* and can, incidentally, spur them to use the target language to say something about the special talent of theirs that has been showcased.)
4. Increase the proportion of writing-before-speaking activities you do. This is one way of addressing the case of any student who is orally glib but keeps making the same mistakes over and over again. Another reason for pre-speaking writing in mixed-level classes is that it increases the likelihood that, in later pair- or groupwork, less proficient students will be able to say something that is interesting *and* comprehensible.

8. Flexible resources

So far I have mainly written of design features of tasks and of teacher behavior. But it is worth saying more about a topic I have only so far grazed-namely, the fact that hard- and softwares for language learning can also be flexible, to the extent that they do not force you or your students to use any particular forms of language. Such materials include:

- stories that you carry in your head and can adapt on the spur of the moment (including liberally pepper with explanations and paraphrases) to suit a particular group or even a particular student
- pictures
- instrumental music
- realia

9. Conclusion

It is nowadays so commonly opined and persuasively argued that homogenous classes are exceptional that I have forborne to go into detail about pertinent hows and whys. My aim has simply been to characterize task flexibility, since use of flexible language learning tasks seems to me to be the most broadly workable means of dealing with modern language classes that are conspicuously mixed in level of proficiency. The two brands of differentiation that I touched on at the outset of this article (i.e., first, differentiation of almost everything including teaching method and, second, differentiation of materials) are of limited feasibility in classes of normal size, unless normal for

you is quite small indeed. It is my hunch, though, that many well-meaning but misguided makers of state-school educational policy would be inclined to persist in advocacy of (at least) materials oriented differentiation because-as is well-known-students' performance on communicative tasks of almost any kind is notoriously problematic and because the applicability of objective checklist evaluation to performance on flexible tasks must be even more doubtful. Ostensibly objective checklist evaluation is something which the modern policy maker is generally wedded to; they are not likely to give it up just like that. But here too is the beginning of a different story than that which I have set out to tell and which ends right here

10. Source note:

Some of the ideas in this article come from the introduction of *Language Activities for Teenagers*. 2004. Seth Lindstromberg, ed. *Cambridge University Press*. See also Penny Ur's two part article, 'Teaching heterogeneous classes' in *The Teacher Trainer*, vol. 1 / 3: 10-13 & vol. 2 /1: 4-5.

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