DEALING WITH PROBLEMS
AT THE LESSONS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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The article deals with problems in teaching foreign languages. Different ideas concerning methods of teaching are given. We also consider some forms of work at the lessons that can be really effective and will help teachers to achieve their aims.

One of the biggest problems teachers face is a lesson where the students are at different levels - some with quite competent English, some whose English isn't very good, and some whose English is only just getting started. As with many other classroom subjects, teachers face this problem every day unless the most rigorous selection has taken place. What then are the possible ways of dealing with the situation?

Use different materials: when teachers know who the good and less good students are, they can form different groups. While one group is working on a piece of language study (e.g. the past continuous), the other group might be reading a story or doing a more advanced grammar exercise. Later, while the better group or groups are discussing a topic, the weaker group or groups might be doing a parallel writing exercise, or sitting round a tape recorder listening to a tape.

Do different tasks with the same material: where the teachers use the same material with the whole class, they can encourage students to do different tasks depending on their abilities. Ignore the problem: it is perfectly feasible to hold the belief that, within a heterogeneous group, students will find their own level. In speaking and writing activities, for example, the better students will probably be more-daring, in reading and listening, they will understand more completely and more quickly. However, the danger of this position is that students will either be bored by the slowness of their colleagues or frustrated by their inability to keep up.

Use the students: some teachers adopt a strategy of peer help and teaching so that better students can help weaker ones. They can work with them in pairs or groups, explaining things, or providing good models of language performance in speaking and writing. Thus, when teachers put students in groups, they can ensure that weak and strong students are put together. However, this has to be done with great sensitivity so that students don't get alienated by their over-knowledgeable peers or oppressed by their obligatory teaching role.

Use worksheets: one solution is for teachers to hand out worksheets for many of the tasks which they would normally do with the whole class – if the class was smaller.

When the feedback stage is reached, teachers can go through the worksheets with the whole group — and all the students will get the benefit.

Use pairwork and groupwork: in large classes. When using pairwork and group work with large groups, it is important to make instructions especially clear, to agree how to stop the activity (many teachers just raise their hands until students notice them and gradually quieten down) and to give good feedback.

Use chorus reaction: since it becomes difficult to use a lot of individual repetition and controlled practice in a big group, it may be more appropriate to use students in chorus.

Use group leaders: teachers can enlist the help of a few group leaders. They can be used to hand out copies, check that everyone in their group (or row or half) has understood a task, collect work and give feedback.

Think about vision and acoustics: big classes often are (but not always) in big rooms. Teachers have to make sure that what they show or write can be seen and that what they say or play to the whole group can be heard.

Use the size of the group to your advantage: big groups have disadvantages of course, but they also have one main advantage - they are bigger, so that humour, for example, is funnier, drama is more dramatic, a good class feeling is warmer and more enveloping. Experienced teachers use this potential to organise exciting and involving classes.

One of the problems that teachers sometimes face with students who all share the same native language is that they use their native language rather than English to perform classroom task. This may be because they want to communicate something important, and so they use language in the best way they know! They will almost certainly find speaking in their language a lot easier than struggling with English.

But, however much teachers might sympathise with their students, the need to have them practising English (rather than their own language) remains paramount.

There are a number of things that can he done in this situation.

Talk to them about the issues: teachers can discuss with students how they should all feel about using English and/or their own language in the class. Teachers should try to get their students' agreement that overuse of their own language means that they will have less chance to learn English; that using their own language during speaking activities denies them chances for rehearsal and feedback.

Encourage them to use English appropriately: teachers should make it clear that there is not a total ban on their own language - it depends on what's happening. In other words, a little

bit of the students' native language when they're working on a reading text is not too much of a problem, but a speaking *Activate* exercise will lose its purpose if not done in English.

Only respond to English use: teachers can make it clear by their behaviour that they want to hear English. They can ignore what students say in their own language. Create an English environment: teachers themselves should speak English for the majority of the time, so that, together with the use of listening material and video, the students are constantly exposed to how English sounds, and what it feels like. Some teachers anglicise their students' names too.

There are a number of things teachers can do to try and solve the problems of uncooperative classes.

Talk to individuals: teachers can speak to individual members of the class outside the classroom. They can ask them what they feel about the class, why there's a problem and what they think can be done about it.

Write to individuals: the same effect can be achieved simultaneously with all students by writing them a (confidential) letter. In the letter, the teacher says that she thinks there's a serious problem in the class and that she wants to know what can be done about it. Students can be invited to write back in complete confidence. The replies which are received (and not all students will reply) will show what some of the problems are The only disadvantage to having students write to the teacher individually is that the teacher then has to write back to each of them!

Use activities: teachers can make it clear that some of the more enjoyable activities which students like to do will only be used when the class is functioning properly. Otherwise, they will be forced to fall back on more formal teaching and language study.

Enlist help: teachers should not have to suffer on their own! They should talk to colleagues and, if possible, get a friend to come and observe the class to see if they notice things that the teacher himself or herself is not aware of

Make a language-learning contract: teachers can talk directly to the students about issues of teaching and learning. They can get the students' agreement to ways of behaving and find out what they expect or need from the teacher. This is the forming of a language-learning 'contract'. Many teachers have come across students who don't seem to want to talk in class. Sometimes, this may have to do with the students' own characters. Sometimes, it is because there are other students who dominate and almost intimidate. Sometimes, it is because students are simply not used to talking freely - for reasons of culture and background. Perhaps, in their culture, women are traditionally expected to remain quiet in a mixed-sex group. Perhaps their culture finds in modesty a positive virtue. Perhaps they suffer from a fear of making mistakes and therefore 'losing face' in front of the teacher and their peers.