

TASK DIFFERENTIATION TO ENHANCE MIXED-ABILITY LEARNERS' RECEPTIVE SKILLS

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Abstract

Are input materials and activity types used for listening and reading suitable to ESP mixed-ability classes? Can they be adapted and differentiated for inclusive classes wherein no learner is left behind whatever his/her proficiency level? Techniques for adapting and differentiating reading and listening tasks to suit learners' varying abilities will be suggested. The paper presents our research outcomes that support the hypothesis that if learners working on the same listening and reading input materials are assigned easier or harder tasks, depending on their proficiency levels, they will improve their receptive skills. We will use a new term—"task doability" to refer to a task that can balance the offer of support to enable the learner to do the task and the provision of challenge for him/her to enjoy doing it. Teachers' awareness about factors that determine task difficulty will be raised to help them manipulate these factors to enhance learning. Moreover, a practical and easy to use framework, which was developed and adopted by the presenter after considerable research as part of an MA dissertation, will be introduced. This practical framework serves as a handy tool that guides teachers in the process of quickly and effectively adapting tasks to suit learners' abilities.

Keywords: Mixed-ability Classes, Task Differentiation, Task Doability

1. Introduction

One of the considerable challenges in teaching the receptive skills is the complex interactions among the opportunities and difficulties that are generated by mixed-ability classes. How often haven't we come across a "blame game" attitude of teachers and managers when it comes to reassessing results in mixed-ability contexts? This attitude gives teachers the illusory conviction that low achievement is not their fault; the problem lies either in the learners or the educational system as a whole. The aim of this study is to put forward practical solutions to so common a problem. In addressing these issues, the approach proposed is that of promoting the centrality of learning for all.

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“All classes in any school are mixed ability to some extent and a view of a class as a homogeneous group has never been truly valid” (Ingleson, 1982, p. 107). “Even if we might say that on Day One of the course, a class appears homogeneous, by the end of the first week, patterns and gradations of levels will have begun to appear” (Wajnryb, 1992, p. 36). Mixed ability is therefore the norm rather than the exception. The term “Mixed ability” across individuals refers to disparate knowledge in terms of language usage and contrasting abilities in using this knowledge in real-time communication. The breadth and depth of these abilities determine their levels of proficiency which can be capitalized on to predict future performance or potential difficulties. Moreover, “There are degrees of language proficiency that can be arranged on a scale” (Knapp, 2009, p. 646). This allows for an objective comparison of individuals, and it permits the tuning of materials and teaching methodology to the students’ proficiency levels.

2. Grade versus Proficiency levels

The assumption that a learner’s grade level is in a one-to-one relationship with his/her proficiency level is questionable. The former is simply an indication of the learner’s school year which depends on the country’s educational system. The latter refers rather to what the learner can do with language that depends on what s/he has learnt, for how long, in what conditions, and so on. Hence, moving from a grade level to the next one on the basis of general ability, which is the case of this country, does not guarantee that progress has been made in every single subject. It is not uncommon to find a first year learner who is more proficient in English than another one in the same university’s second or third grades, let alone comparing learners in the same class.

Thus, the issue of mixed ability would not have existed, had it been true that the grade level is a mirror of the proficiency level. Taking it for granted that the two types of level as two sides of the same coin is then commonsensically a mistaken stance. The learners’ class is a direct indication of their grade level, but it is neither an indication of their proficiency level in particular subjects nor a reflection of an individual’s levels across subjects. Although learners’ abilities cannot be reliably measured, proficiency levels can be measured and categorized by the use of some reference frameworks (CEF, ALTE and AEF).

3. Teaching the receptive skills in mixed-ability classes

As we all know, whatever level we pitch our lessons at, it will be too easy or slow for some and too difficult or fast for others. A possible solution could be to revisit the materials used in class. Useful questions could be:

1. Are the input materials and activity types – used for listening and reading suitable to mixed ability classes?

2. Can input materials and activities be adapted to suit mixed ability classes?
3. What are the criteria to be applied for the adaptation of these materials?
4. Are the adapted materials and activities successful enough to enhance learners' proficiency development?

Teaching the receptive skills of reading and listening to develop the competency of interpreting oral and written texts using the same input materials and the same activity types in the textbook may easily result in the frustration of the weaker learners and the boredom of the stronger ones in the context of mixed-ability classes. The question here is: how can we avoid the frustration of the weaker learners and the boredom of the stronger ones?

Whole-class teaching can hope to cater for learners of different abilities. Assuming that all students learn in the same manner and at the same pace, and delivering one-size-fits-all lessons wherein students are supposed to do more or less "the same thing, at the same time, and in the same way" (Ur, 1991, p. 233) is pedagogically a mistaken stance. Students neither learn the same way nor work at the same pace. Hence, students' readiness and potential for achievement differ. Bearing this in mind, teachers are not supposed to prepare as many different lesson plans as the number of students in their classes. However, it does call for differentiation in the classroom to suit as many of their needs as possible.

Bowler and Parminter (2002, p. 59) "believe that students' ability to read or listen successfully is governed by a simple equation: text level of challenge + task level of support = student success [emphasis added]". Therefore, if the first variable is kept constant (text level of challenge) by providing the same oral or written texts in the textbook, the second variable (task level of support) needs to be manipulated and adjusted to get always positive results (student success).

4. Research hypothesis

"One should keep in mind that nothing is more frustrating to the learners than being assigned tasks that are beyond their attainment level" (Riche et al., 2005, p. 16). This is the case for the less gifted learners, whereas their more gifted peers are soaring ahead. These statements can be used advantageously to make the following hypothesis: If learners working on the same listening and reading input materials are assigned easier or harder tasks, depending on their proficiency levels, they will improve their receptive skills.

It means that students are given the same oral or written text, but the tasks differ in terms of support. Regardless of their initial proficiency level, learners are going to move forward when they are appropriately challenged. So, no one is left behind. In addition, teachers can encourage stronger students to learn more in cross-ability groupings by teaching their weaker classmates in a cooperative way.

Take the analogy of a hospital ward where patients' needs differ, and therefore they need to be attended to differently. Though learners may have the same ultimate goal in learning a language, it is not unusual that they do go through different learning journeys or trajectories to attain that very goal. Their learning paths are different due to differences in terms of language ability.

The language ability of a learner determines and is influenced by his/her skills development. This implies that the learning load is heavier for low ability learners when it comes to skills development and the priorities may also be different.



Figure 1: Observable and unobservable language abilities (Schellekens, 2007)
Research Methodology

For the sake of investigating the effect of using multilevel tasks for teaching listening and reading skills in mixed-ability classes, an experimental approach was opted for. The experiment was conducted to compare the results of data measurement tools that can be obtained by the control group where the same input materials and the same tasks are assigned to all the students, and the experimental group where students are assigned the same oral/written input materials but different tasks according to their proficiency level in reading and listening (see task differentiation below). The two groups were randomly chosen from one secondary school following the same stream (literary stream). Each group contains 26 members of different abilities studying in one class provided that each member has a counterpart in the other group that has got approximately the same mark in the listening and reading pre-test. The two groups were taught for one school year then sat for a post-test of reading and listening competencies.

The experimental study was conducted at Debbouz Ahcene secondary school in Skikda, Algeria, and the researcher was in charge of teaching both the control and experimental groups.

The experimental study supported our hypothesis that predicts the positive impact of using multilevel tasks to teach the receptive skills in mixed-ability classes on the learners' receptive skills development.

5. Task differentiation

The question that is worth asking is what should tasks look like if they are intended to enhance language learning in mixed-ability classes? The adaptation which is investigated in this research (see research methodology above) occurs at the level of tasks in terms of their difficulty level. The tasks in the textbook can be made more difficult or easier than they are. The aim is to make them doable by the intended learners.

These adaptations were based on a tentative framework to ensure task doability. The latter has been developed by the researcher to seek the best possible match between the learners' abilities and the level of challenge and support of the tasks at hand, as illustrated through the diagram below (see Figure 2).

The teachers' main role in implementing this approach to teaching the receptive skills in mixed-ability classes is to ensure that some learning is taking place by trying to involve every single learner in the process through materials differentiation and adaptation. Ignoring the fact that learners have different communicative language abilities in one's class is a pedagogically unwise practice that prevents an important number of learners from experiencing learning and/or enjoying it. This practice belongs to the old-fashioned teacher-centred methodologies.

6. Task doability

Suitable or appropriate difficulty of any task refers to an optimal match between the task challenge and the learner's abilities. A challenging task is the one that entices the learner to make efforts to do it. This task has to be a little beyond his/her ability level. The level of challenge can be fine-tuned through the manipulation of the linguistic or non-linguistic support provided with the task to achieve the best possible fit between the task and the abilities of the learner. A failure in matching the task difficulty to the learner's abilities is likely to result in not doing it altogether.

The process-oriented term task doability has been coined, in this research, to refer to a task that can balance the offer of support to enable the learner to do the task and the provision of challenge for him/her to enjoy doing it. It is a matter of offering enough support yet the right challenge for each learner or group of learners. Put differently, a doable task is neither too easy nor too difficult for the learner or group of learners to perform. Task doability depends to a great extent on the learner's abilities and therefore his/her proficiency. The 'support' variable should be inversely proportional to the 'challenge' variable so as to remain complementary to each other. The question is how can language learners be challenged and supported to develop their communicative language abilities to use the target language in real-life communicative situations?

In this study, working on the same text, different learners are required to do different tasks. The tasks, in this study, differ in terms of difficulty and complexity so that they become doable. Task doability cannot be calculated mathematically but rather in a 'more-or-less' sort of way that requires knowledge of what learners can do and know. According to Wajnryb (1992), there are some indicators of challenge and others of ease that help teachers detect any mismatch.

7. Tentative framework for receptive tasks differentiation

The following tentative framework was developed and adopted in administering the treatment to the target group (see research methodology above). This framework helped in manipulating the task doability in two directions to get more challenging and less supported tasks or less challenging and more supported ones to make an appropriate match to learners' profiles (see Figure 2 below). To use this framework, one has to have enough knowledge of his/her learners' abilities and, bearing on the difficulty of the text itself, has to go right or left to choose from the possible options to produce versions of the same task that differ in terms of their levels of challenge and support.

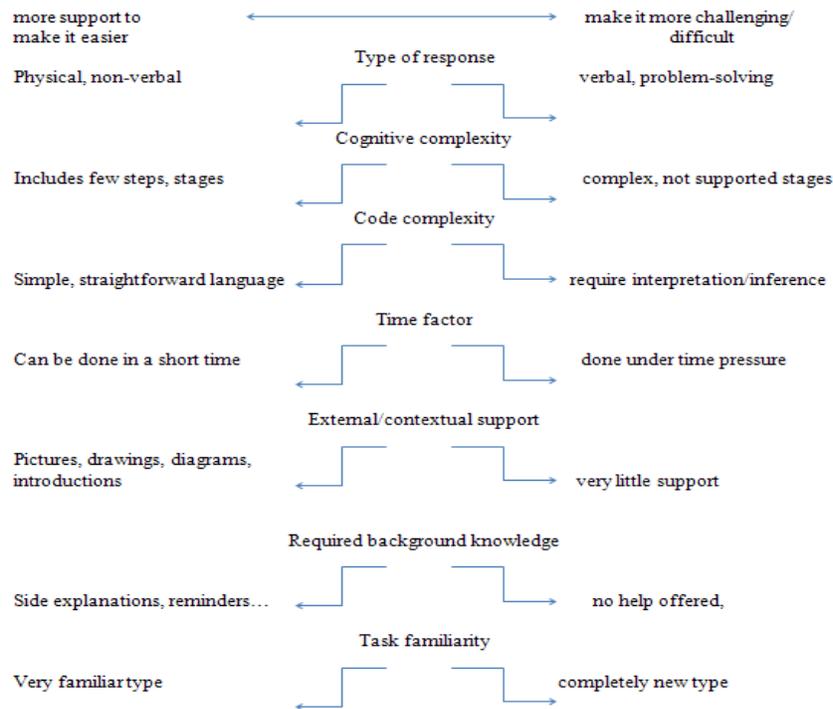


Figure 2: Task differentiation framework

During the experimentation period, the materials for teaching the receptive skills in the textbook *New Prospects* (the adopted textbook for those learners) were used as they are with the control group. Conversely, the experimental group worked on differentiated worksheets during those reading and listening classes (see appendix).

Differentiated worksheets, in this research work, were adapted from the original materials on the basis of the above tentative framework for determining task difficulty and doability so as to come up with different versions of the same task that match the different ability groups in one's class. Besides, it was up to the learner to choose the task which s/he thought was doable as it was indicated by the number of stars. One star indicated that the corresponding task was the easiest one. As far as feedback is concerned, students worked collaboratively in mixed-ability groups to get help from each other before conducting a short whole-class feedback.

8. The use of multilevel worksheets

To enable students to work to their full potential and to overcome the ineffectiveness and inappropriateness of textbooks, the materials used for teaching the receptive skills in mixed-ability classes were supplemented with a number of worksheets that contained different versions of the same task that differed in terms of their doability level. These multilevel tasks were performed using the same reading or listening input materials for all the learners.

The three-level-worksheet approach to task design is proficiency or ability-based. It provides a hierarchy of versions of the same task that are tailored to the different learning abilities in mixed-ability groups. These worksheets include three or more versions of each task in the lesson: for example, one at the group's level, another one more challenging and a third one less so. Teachers thus may create a bank of differentiated activities to be used with mixed-ability groups. Furthermore, to enhance learner-centeredness, the learners are allowed to choose from the available versions of the task.

9. Differentiating homework and project work

There is no clear beneficial objective in giving homework that is too demanding or not challenging enough for the learner. Henceforth, homework has been adapted to the learners' abilities. Learners were provided with homework worksheets that differ in terms of task doability.

In project work, the stronger students generally took over in mixed-ability group work. So distributing role cards and appointing a group secretary to ensure that everyone had contributed something that worked better than just sharing one task whatever the learners' abilities were. A project was divided so that different groups

tackled different sections, and then they all had to collaborate with each other to put the final touches to the project work.

10. Using technology to differentiate tasks

The availability of a plethora of multimedia computer software and the frequent use of technology by teenagers facilitated the provision of adequate resources for technology-based differentiation. The framework of task differentiation was used along with some multilevel tasks templates to produce endless tasks that suit the varying abilities of learners. Besides, interactive programmes allowed learners to personalize these tasks.

11. Conclusions

Teachers could claim that textbook adaptation and differentiation is a very demanding task though it is not necessarily the case. Distributing the resulting workload and sharing the benefits would be a workable solution to such a problem. This can be achieved through collaboration. Moreover, teachers can set up groups to work together on small research projects so as the novices develop their professional skills, and the more experienced ones hone theirs. They need to learn how to marry classroom teaching to researching and to take advantage of relevant research findings by practitioners. Task evaluation, for instance, as a prerequisite to any adaptation “constitute a kind of action research that can contribute to reflective practice in teaching” (Ellis, 1997, p. 36). In addition to that, teachers should be encouraged to think critically and reflect upon their practices as a way of harnessing their teaching skills. Practitioners’ research could be a promising method of achieving this. “What really persuades people to make professional change is the practical experience of trying out something themselves” (Lynch, 1996, p.xv). All these efforts may culminate in a fruitful kind of teacher autonomy that is based on learning from experience and reflection upon practice.

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Appendix: Sample Tasks

Listening tasks (Lesson one p. 76, *New Prospects*)

Worksheet1: students have to listen and answer the comprehension questions in a written form

Worksheet2: students have to listen and choose the best answers from the list.

Worksheet3: students have to listen and match questions to answer that are in jumble order.

Worksheet 1

You are about to listen to a conversation between a secondary school headmaster and a pupil's father. Answer these questions A-F.

- A. Why did Mr Harris go to see the headmaster?

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What has Mr Harris's son, William, decided to do?

.....

What do Mr and Mrs Harris ought to do? Why?

.....

- B. What alternative job could be taken up by William according to the headmaster?

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- C. What could William study if he wanted to become a commercial artist?

.....

- D. What advice does the headmaster give Mr Harris about William's choice?

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Worksheet 2

You are about to listen to a conversation between a secondary school headmaster and a pupil's father. Choose the best answer for each question.

- A. Why did Mr Harris go to see the headmaster?

- a. to register his son
- b. to discuss about his daughter
- c. to discuss about his son
- d. to be his friend

- B. What has Mr Harris's son, William, decided to do?

- a. to become teacher.
- b. to become an artist.
- c. to get married.
- d. to leave the school.

- C. What do Mr and Mrs Harris ought to do? Why?

- a. choose something more secure
 - b. don't choose something more secure
 - c. choose something more artistic
 - d. choose something less secure
- D. What alternative job could be taken up by William according to the headmaster?
- a. Graphic designer
 - b. teacher
 - c. artist
 - d. commercial artist
- E. What could William study if he wanted to become a commercial artist?
- a. to take an art course
 - b. to take a computer course
 - c. to take an English course
 - d. to take a painting course
- F. What advice does the headmaster give Mr Harris about William's choice?
- a. He shouldn't stand in his way.
 - b. He shouldn't listen to him.
 - c. He should stop him.
 - d. He should know about his choice.

Worksheet 3



You are about to listen to a conversation between a secondary school headmaster and a pupil's father. Match the questions A-F to their answers.

- A. Why did Mr Harris go to see the headmaster?
- B. What has Mr Harris's son, William, decided to do?
- C. What do Mr and Mrs Harris ought to do? Why?
- D. What alternative job could be taken up by William according to the headmaster?
- E. What could William study if he wanted to become a commercial artist?
- F. What advice does the headmaster give Mr Harris about William's choice?
 - 1. to take an art course.
 - 2. He shouldn't stand in his way.
 - 3. choose something more secure.
 - 4. commercial artist.
 - 5. to discuss about his son, William.
 - 6. to become an artist.

Reading Tasks

Worksheet1: students have to read and answer the comprehension questions in a written form

Worksheet2: students have to read and answer the comprehension questions in a written form but they are directed towards the corresponding paragraph that contains the answer

Worksheet3: students have to read and choose the best answers from the list. They are also provided with some prompts to start with when they have to write answers.

Worksheet A

Read the text and answer the following questions

- A. Why are the politicians who promise little money for education less popular than the ones who promise a lot?
- B. Do British children receive the two stages of their primary education in the same schools?
- C. How would you describe access to university in Britain and the US?
- D. What are school performance tables published annually for?

Worksheet B

Read the text and answer the following questions

- A. Why are the politicians who promise little money for education less popular than the ones who promise a lot? (&1)
- B. Do British children receive the two stages of their primary education in the same schools?(&2)
- C. How would you describe access to university in Britain and the US?
a- difficult b- easy c- selective d- free
- D. What are school performance tables published annually for? (&3)

Worksheet C

Read the text and answer the following questions

- A. Why are the politicians who promise little money for education less popular than the ones who promise a lot?
 - a. Education is important for the British
 - b. Education is very important for the British
 - c. Education is not important for the British
 - d. money is important for the British
- B. Do British children receive the two stages of their primary education in the same schools?
 - a- No, not all of them. b-no, Some of them c-yes, all of them
- E. How would you describe access to university in Britain and the US?
a- difficult b- easy c- selective d- free
- C. What are school performance tables published annually for?

They are published to.....