

Nine Practical Measures for Mixed-level Classes

SCHNICKEL, Jacob

Abstract

In this essay, I share nine teaching techniques that have proven useful in the English classes I have taught. Though varied, these techniques have in common that they are useful in mixed-level classes. Some are simple practices that instructors can incorporate into their lessons with little preparation. Others include homework assignments that could be used in nearly any type of course. Two overarching themes characterize these techniques. First is that of students defining success through tracking their own progress and making improvements based on their assessments of themselves. The second theme present in these techniques is that of building a supportive classroom culture.

Introduction

All language classes are made up of students with varying degrees of skill. Indeed, this holds true for any group of people in any context; aptitudes and attitudes differ. Even when efforts are made to group students based on ability, levels will be mixed. In this essay, I describe nine techniques that have the effect of leveling the playing field for mixed-ability groups. I have deliberately avoided writing “techniques *to* level the playing field” because these classroom practices have primary effects that are of greater value than the secondary effect of addressing the mixed-level issue. Put differently, these are, based on my experience over years of teaching, worthwhile techniques that support student learning while also mitigating—or even making use of—differences among students’ levels.

Keeping score

There are any number of ways that a student can track her own progress over time. In a mixed-level class, while it is good for students to know what their peers are capable of, paying attention to their own development over time allows learners to notice trends in their own performance, and if students make adequate effort in a well designed curriculum, this trend should be positive. For instance, in a listening class for which students listened to an academic-style lecture each week, I had them estimate the

percentage of the lecture they had understood and record it on a chart. They listened to each lecture twice, and for each time they recorded a percentage. In addition, students rated their level of focus on a one-to-ten scale. Thus, for each listening, they would note their percentage of comprehension and their focus level, as in the example below.

Date: <i>January 7</i>	Listening 1	Listening 2
Comprehension	50%	65%
Focus	7	8

From week to week, students could monitor their own progress and try to improve upon previous weeks' percentages. The focus score adds another element to the overall picture, but its main value may lie in the fact that it simply serves as a reminder to pay attention. Other ways for students to track progress include recording reading speeds for regular timed readings, as well as scores on grammar, vocabulary, or listening quizzes.

Linked assignments

Linked assignments are similar to the keeping score exercises above but with greater narrative detail. What follows is an example from a course designed to maximize speaking time. During each lesson, students would have at least three conversations on a weekly topic, such as entertainment, personality, or travel. After their speaking sessions, students would write a short reflection on what they'd done well and what they'd like to improve for the next time. Given that lessons repeat the same structure each time, students are assured the opportunity to try again. Before they do, however, they review their homework assignment to remind themselves of both what they'd done well in the previous lesson (which, of course, is something to continue) and what they'd like to improve. Thus from week to week, students are learning from themselves and setting goals based on observations. In reviewing hundreds of these, I've noted that students typically identify realistic areas for improvement. Examples include relying less on notes, making more eye contact, smiling more, and asking better questions to their partners.

Written exchanges

Written exchanges between student and teacher allow for communication that is both appropriate for the student's level and specific to her needs. Furthermore, written communication allows the student to read as often as necessary for comprehension,

unlike spoken words—particularly in a group context. One of my graduate school professors had his students submit what he called “journals” three times during the semester. The only assignments required for the course, these comprised reactions, anecdotes, and realizations based on assigned readings, class discussions and activities. He encouraged us to bring in our own experiences and to connect in-class activities and conversations with our lives outside the classroom. He would then respond to each of us in handwritten notes on our papers. I felt this was particularly effective because of the diversity of students in the group; we all had different professional backgrounds—some were corporate trainers, some were ESL educators, and one was a school principal. Writing to each of us individually, while time consuming, was a way for our professor to provide each student feedback and encouragement that was specific to his or her unique trajectory. Similarly, I use written assignments to address the diversity of levels and needs in my own classes and to ensure that each student has a personalized experience.

Three chances

In language classes, there are certain tasks for which I give students three attempts. These include topical discussions with a partner or in a small group, poster presentations, and other types of informal presentations. The aim in doing this is to give each learner the opportunity to experience progress in a single day. I encourage students to reflect on their first performance and to set reasonable goals for how to improve on the second. This process is repeated between the second and third attempts. Typical reports on improvements include making better eye contact with others; feeling more relaxed; using more of the target language, English; and relying less on notes. In fact, regarding this last point, I suggest to students a general guideline that illustrates the kind of progress they might experience over the course of three iterations of their presentations: first, they should feel free to rely heavily on their notes—to the point they are essentially reading a prepared statement; for the second time, they can glance at their notes periodically during their talk to refresh memory but without reading; for the final iteration, I encourage them to present without notes. With this model in mind, students have an image to accompany the idea of improving over the course of three attempts. As the class moves from one attempt to the next, I often ask students to set a specific goal for the next time. I also ask volunteers to share improvements they’ve noticed in their own performances. Thus, we aim to create a culture of improvement in the classroom, and there are three opportunities for each student to experience this.

Time to prepare

For any type of spoken production, be it a presentation or a conversation, I remind students that preparation outside of class time will certainly lead to better performance in class. While this may be seen as stating the obvious, preparation before class is truly a great equalizer, and it bears repeating. While more advanced students may be able to leverage preexisting skills to perform well on a task with little or no preparation, lower level students can close the gap by investing more time in preparation. When a student's performance is such that I feel it likely she has prepared at home for a certain task, I often ask. If she answers "yes," I let her know that it paid off—that the content and manner of what she'd said reflected her investment in preparation. Over time and with repetition, this investment will lead not only to strong performance on an isolated task but also to greater overall competence with the language.

Check with your partner

"Check with your partner." This is a phrase I've repeated countless times during my years as a teacher. I use it for a number of reasons. After I've explained something in class—anything from a grammar point to a homework assignment—I want to ensure that all students have grasped the content of my message. To increase the likelihood of this happening, I ask students to confirm their understanding with a partner or within a group of three. This results in one of three situations. The first is complete understanding for the pair or trio. When students have understood the message, they simply confirm what they they've heard. The second is partial understanding. In these cases, students can often help one another fill in gaps in comprehension, yielding complete understanding for the pair or trio after some discussion. The third type of situation arises when the pair or group together lacks complete understanding of the message. In such cases, students seem to feel more comfortable asking—as a group rather than an individual—me for clarification. To sum up, this is a simple way to reduce the likelihood that students, in isolation, will feign comprehension or choose not to ask a question for fear of drawing unwanted attention.

I also have students work with a partner or as a trio in other situations, such as checking homework or working through textbook exercises. Again, the purpose is to reduce instances of students who don't understand what is happening around them by having them confer with a another. Furthermore, before sharing answers in front of the class, students have a chance to confirm their understanding. All of this leads to more sharing

in class, more questions from students, and, coupled with the next practice, a greater willingness to take some risks in the classroom.

Appreciation for mistakes

In the previous section, I described the practice of having students confer with partners before being called on to make any kind of question or statement in front of the class. It is generally my wish to not put students on the spot in a way that is uncomfortable or embarrassing. Thus, I work to ensure proper understanding of the task at hand and that students will have something to offer in cases when I ask for contributions. To further reduce the likelihood of students' feelings of embarrassment or failure, I explain that any errors or mistakes that arise can become the object of a brief lesson, an opportunity to learn something.

Explanations go only so far, however, so the real test of this technique lies in actual practice. The following is an example from one of my classes. I often ask students to work with a partner to create an interesting sentence about one of the pictures in our textbook. I then chose a student to read the sentence she produced with her partner. It is here, just prior to asking a student to share her sentence that we begin building a culture of appreciation for mistakes, saying that we will use them to learn more about English.

One of the pictures that we used for this exercise included a man in the process of tying his necktie. I called on a student to read her sentence about the picture. She said, "The man is wearing a tie." I might write this sentence on the board and point out that it is grammatically perfect, saying that because he is in the process of tying the tie, the present continuous is an appropriate choice. Then I might say that we need a different verb to describe the process illustrated by the picture, and I might demonstrate instances of "wearing" thus: "I'm wearing shoes now, and she's wearing glasses." I'd probably then erase the word "wearing" and draw two lines in its place, one longer and one shorter. I'd then see if anyone could produce the correct words, "putting on." If not, I'd provide the prompts "p" and "o." At this point, someone will likely be able to provide the answer. I'd then quiz them with some mimed examples of both putting on and wearing to solidify their understanding of the difference.

All of this goes to illustrate that a single mistake can become the source of a useful lesson that is appropriate for the group. If there had been no mistake, there would have been no lesson. Moreover, because the topic for the mini lesson came from a student, it can be considered both appropriate in terms of level and relevant because it addresses the task at hand. Carrying this line of thought forward, if the majority of the group finds the question easy, the mini lesson will go quickly. If not, it will take more time.

Shifting focus

In many of the classes I teach, speaking is the primary focus, and even if it isn't, oral communication plays an important role. In such classes, it is probably fair to say that more emphasis is placed on having students express their opinions, explain their feelings, and describe episodes from their lives than on the facilitation of this type of production. In simpler terms, the role of the *interviewee* is perhaps valued more than that of the *interviewer*. Though these are not terms typically used to describe participants in a conversation, they are useful here. It is worthwhile, in my experience, to support students' development in asking questions (the interviewer role) to draw out detailed responses from a fellow student (the interviewee).

This type of training might fall under the category of “the art of conversation” in that it helps students keep a conversation alive by asking questions, showing interest and clarifying meaning. The training can be thought of as serving also to help more advanced students support lower-level students by shouldering more of the work by asking thoughtful, well formed questions. I share the following with students as a model of a conversation driven by questions. In this example, B's answers are short, but A keeps the conversation alive through questions.

A What's your favorite food?

B I like pizza.

A Oh, really? Me, too. What's your favorite topping?

B Pepperoni.

A I see. How often do you eat pizza?

B Twice a week.

A Wow! Where do you usually eat pizza?

B At home. I usually make it.

A That's great! How did you learn to make pizza?

B My dad taught me. He used to work at an Italian restaurant

By incorporating this type of practice into my classes—by providing it to students of all levels—it is my hope that it will serve well when students of different levels meet to have a discussion. Deploying this skill by someone of a higher level working with someone of a lower level has three distinct benefits. First, the questioner will be challenged in inverse proportion to the brevity of her partner’s responses. This type of challenge will provide ample practice for the more advanced student. Second, both students will be able to maintain an active conversation, one that doesn’t fade into uncomfortable silence. Finally, with each question from the more advanced student, the less skilled student has another opportunity to contribute to the conversation.

“I don’t know.”

To conclude this list, I’ll describe the simplest classroom practice of all: explaining to students that saying “I don’t know” is an acceptable response to a question from the teacher. First, by saying this, the student is using English, the target language. Second, the lesson is allowed to proceed; we can move to another student, or, if necessary, I can provide additional information or even the answer. Finally, and most importantly, armed with this phrase, no student need feel stuck not knowing what to say or do in response to a question. The way forward for herself and for the entire class is as simple as saying “I don’t know.”

Conclusion

By using some combination of these nine techniques in nearly all of the classes I teach, it is my hope that students of all levels are able to participate meaningfully in all lessons and activities. Here I use “meaningfully” to indicate two qualities of participation. First, is to indicate that students’ contributions help move the activity forward for the pair, group or class. This type of participation can be as simple as saying “I don’t know,” a statement in the target language that allows the group to take the next step. Highlighting the importance of asking follow-up questions and providing opportunities for practicing this is another way to support mixed-level groups in keeping their conversations moving forward. A good follow-up question from a more advanced student can be seen as a helping hand offered to another student who may be unsure of what to say in a conversation.

The second sense in which I use “meaningfully” is to indicate that students have opportunities to assess their progress relative to their own prior performance; an example of this includes linked assignments in which students reflect on their performance on a given task, identify ways in which they’d like to improve and then review before the next lesson with the aim of implementing their improvement plan. Another example of this type of participation is seen in the simple practice of providing students three opportunities to provide a given task.