Teaching disparate learner groups

Diverse backgrounds, educational experiences, learning skills and language levels are common in many language classrooms and ESL teachers are constantly searching for new strategies to address the differing needs of their learners. The action research summarised in this book shows how practising ESL teachers of adults have attempted to deal with the diversity within their classrooms. Seven key topics are considered, ranging from learner perceptions and beliefs to the advantages of collaborative teaching. The book consists of a brief overview of current theory followed by strategies and practical suggestions from practising teachers. It will be useful to ESL teachers as well as to trainers running professional development courses.

The Professional Development Collection consists of short, practical books on teaching topics drawn from recent research projects. Its aim is to help teachers keep up to date with specific areas of classroom practice by drawing together research, theory and practice. Other books in the series include: Developing critical literacy, Monitoring learner progress and Using technology in the classroom.
Teaching disparate learner groups

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Introduction to the series

This book is part of a series that draws on recent research projects conducted in the Australian adult ESL context. The aim of the series is to explore some of the research findings from these projects and some of the general literature in the area in order to suggest implications for classroom practice. Thus, the series attempts to draw together research, theory and practice in a way that is accessible to practising teachers.

The focus in this book is on the teaching of disparate learner groups. Diverse backgrounds, educational experiences, learning skills and language levels are common in many language classrooms and ESL teachers are constantly seeking new strategies to address the different needs of their learners. The majority of the examples in this book are drawn from recent action research (Burns and Hood 1997) conducted by teachers who were attempting to explore their own practice within classes that contained disparate learner groups and to look for the most effective means of teaching such groups.

The main body of the book summarises the principal findings of the research in point form, then offers practical suggestions for activities that will help teachers to examine the issues for themselves in their own classrooms. The findings and the suggestions are supported, and in some cases expanded upon, by quotations from the research papers themselves. For ease of reading, the supporting quotations appear on the left-hand pages, opposite the findings or suggestions to which they are addressed. However, both right-hand and left-hand pages are equally important elements in the discussion and both contribute towards a fuller understanding of working with disparate learner groups.

At the back of the book there is a list of references from which quotations have been taken, and another list containing further relevant texts. Together these two lists provide a broad overview of the current research in the area of disparate learner groups.
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Introduction

Disparate, or mixed ability, groups are classes of learners who generally display varied and diverse individual language and learning characteristics so that a teacher may be faced with a wide range of planning considerations in order to meet the needs of every learner. This reflection from a teacher of a disparate group of learners demonstrates some of the differences that have to be considered:

Were there any [writing] tasks that were of interest to a 40 year old, long term unemployed man who had one year of schooling and who was once a fisherman in Vietnam; a 30 year old Lebanese car salesman; a middle aged Chinese woman still coming to terms with letter formation; and a newly arrived 19 year old Macedonian student who had been studying for 11 years and had planned to become an architect? Was it possible to apply the principle of 'starting where the students were at'? (Clarkson 1997)

A group may differ in many aspects, such as:

- proficiency levels in spoken and/or written English, or learning outcomes already achieved
- levels of education and varied experiences in formal learning
- literacy in first language
- preferred learning pace
- length of residence in Australia, knowledge of social systems etc
- expectations about the course
- goals and interests in language learning
- contact with English outside the classroom
- cultural values and attitudes
- preferred learning styles
- confidence, personality and motivation
- health factors and personal circumstances
- age
- gender.

Why is teaching disparate learner groups an issue?

Disparate groups … are part of everyday teaching life. (McPherson 1997)

Teachers in every field encounter disparate groups of learners. In the field of ESL in particular teachers have always worked with learners who differ widely in social and educational backgrounds and in their ability to learn a new language. However, the challenge of catering for the needs of disparate learner groups has become greater over the past few years due to changes that have taken place in Australia. These changes include:

- changes in immigration and education policy which have made it difficult for teaching centres to group learners according to their abilities and goals
- a more competitive education marketplace that has led to diversification of provision and clientele and has sometimes resulted in students from both non-English-speaking backgrounds and English-speaking backgrounds studying in the same course
- recent shifts to integrated programs in the workplace that have led to more disparate groups in training programs
- the introduction of competency-based programs in which teachers have to meet the requirements of a competency framework as well as the individual needs of their students.

The action research summarised in this book shows how practising ESL teachers of adults have attempted to address the issue of teaching disparate learner groups. The sections that follow reflect the experiences of these teacher-researchers and suggest ways for other teachers to continue the enquiry. The seven main issues that have been identified from the action research are listed on the contents page.

… one of the most challenging tasks for teachers is to create environments that provide access to successful learning for the massive diversity of students typically present in most Australian educational contexts today … It is a vindication of teachers’ dedication and expertise that they do so often succeed in assisting students to learn. For ESL teachers, these factors are compounded by the multiplicity of additional factors present in ESL classrooms. (Stone 1995: 50)
All the students liked being in classes of varying levels. They saw no problems in this at all ... they were glad to have other students to ask for help ... with a bit of encouragement from each other, and the teacher, they also learned to use their own resources, like dictionaries and calculators, to become more independent learners ... The discussions [about disparateness] actually helped to unify the group and to help the students work cooperatively. *(Whitham 1997:34, 35, 36)*

... the biggest advantage of a disparate group of learners is that it allows people to appreciate differences rather than sameness. It helps them to think and reflect on their own responses to people with different strengths and weaknesses to themselves. *(Goodman 1997:66)*

Social cooperation and teamwork are valued attributes in the workplace. *(Whitham 1997:36)*

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### Learner perceptions and beliefs

What are students’ perceptions about being in a group of disparate learners?

#### Findings

> Teachers' concepts of diversity or disparateness are not always matched by learners' beliefs and perceptions.

> Many learners express bewilderment at the idea that their class could be seen as 'disparate'. Others view the wide variety of different personalities, skills and levels as a positive aspect of the class.

> It seems more useful to see 'disparateness' as a classroom reality and as a challenge to be addressed and solved rather than as a barrier to teaching and learning.
What Researchers say

... I mentioned to ... the stronger students that I felt that I was neglecting them in the numeracy sessions. They were surprised and assured me that they liked the present system. One [said] 'We don't want a teacher breathing down our necks ... We like it when you give us the sheet and we can just get on with it. Don't worry - we'll yell if we need you.'

(Ross 1997:134)

Suggestions for the classroom

> After the learners have had time to become comfortable with each other, discuss the nature of the group with them. Ask, for example, how they feel when:
  - they get things wrong
  - they finish quickly
  - they can't understand
  - something is really easy
  - someone else asks them for help
  - there is no-one to ask for help.

> Ask them for their opinions on learning in a diverse class.

> Simply ask students, individually or as a group, if they are concerned about whether you are meeting their particular needs. You may be worrying unnecessarily.

> Do activities that highlight learners' strengths to show explicitly how students can work together. For example, some students may be stronger in speaking, others in reading.

> Encourage students to help each other without being asked. This is good for both the helper and the helped.

> Find out students' strengths in non-language areas (eg personal, occupational, hobby) and explore ways to utilise these in learning activities. Allow them to make use of their strengths and allow others to see and value these.

> Allow students to use their first language resources to complete tasks where possible.
... discussions that revolved around cultural or social differences were not acceptable [because] the majority of the students were from a region experiencing civil war and ... represented different ethnic and religious backgrounds ...

I suddenly realised ... [that] I was introducing activities which demanded that they expose and discuss the differences they were attempting to ignore!

(McPherson 1997a:28, 29)

[Our open discussion sessions] had given me a very clear picture that these students were not only from diverse backgrounds but were dealing with very stressful physical and emotional problems which affected their ability to learn and interact positively. I needed to recognise these ‘affective’ issues and to find ways of limiting their influence on the learning process.

(Muldoon 1997:18)

The strategies teachers need to use to take account of [torture and trauma] experiences are closely related to those used by many teachers as a normal part of their work. The difference is that teachers of survivors will [need] ... to create the supportive conditions necessary to give them as much chance as others of learning successfully.

(Stone 1995:54)

How can teachers minimise the effects of diversity in non-language areas?

Findings

> Cultural, social and affective factors such as motivation, attitudes to learning, family problems, cultural or ethnic conflict, may have more impact in a diverse class.

> Selecting appropriate teaching strategies, topics and approaches is made easier if you spend time finding out learners’ attitudes and feelings.

> For many learners, non-language outcomes, such as self-confidence and motivation, are more achievable than language outcomes in the short term. Their non-language achievements in one class may enable successful language learning in the next.

> Regardless of the nature of the ‘disparateness’, teaching practice that builds learner confidence, ensures successful learning experiences and establishes a comfortable, relaxed and safe environment will facilitate learning for most learners.
What Researchers Say

Extracts from the diaries were occasionally circulated in class (with permission) to encourage discussion ... The diary entries highlighted a need for teaching and discussing the language to express a range of emotional responses, a significant need ... for many of our students. (Grayson 1997:41)

... a 63-year-old Bosnian woman ... was completely withdrawn. Why was she not engaging in the classroom activities? Were they too cognitively demanding? Did she have any formal learning strategies? Was it that she was linguistically overwhelmed? Or was she a survivor of war-related trauma, and at this stage, unready for language classes? ...

So to be able to make an assessment on that, it was decided to get her at various opportunities to use L1, and see if her behaviour was the same, and it was totally different.

... When new language was being introduced, [she] was encouraged to vocalise the translation into her L1. While the oral use of the target language ... did not increase dramatically, her participation and involvement in the classroom did. (Hatcher-Friel 1997:83)

Suggestions for the classroom

> Make time to discuss how learners feel about being in the class.
> Get students to write about how they feel - diaries, journals, letters to you, creative writing. Unstructured writing can be a window into individual student concerns, needs and interests and a guide to how these fit with the course goals, methodologies and materials.
> In course design, set objectives for the achievement of non-language outcomes and make these strategies explicit to the learners.
> Think carefully about any behaviours that might relate to cultural, social or affective factors (eg cultural attitudes to learning, school experiences, torture and trauma symptoms). Avoid making assumptions about such behaviours and try to ascertain their real cause. If necessary, arrange additional help, such as counselling, through your teaching centre.
> Where it seems appropriate for learners who are not participating, try allowing them to translate into their own language.
> Try to read at least one book or article a month or term on cultural, social or affective factors relevant to your classroom situation (eg cross-cultural communication, teaching torture and trauma survivors, cultural learning styles, groups with special needs). If possible, discuss what you have read with other teachers.
Course design and planning

How can we plan courses that meet the whole group’s needs and interests?

Findings

> It is easy to overlook or simplify the complexity of individual needs. We cannot plan a course at an individual level, but a clearer understanding of the nature of individual needs makes course planning more effective.

> It is important to discuss and explain your pedagogy to the learners; for example, such issues as:
  - the types of activities you will ask learners to undertake and why
  - what you think their responsibilities are
  - why you are using different approaches.

> It is easy to make assumptions about learners’ needs before the course or to investigate them only at the very outset. Learners’ needs vary enormously from individual to individual. They also vary, for one individual, over time and so need constant monitoring.

What Researchers say

There appeared to be a far greater likelihood of dissatisfaction with aspects of the learning context for students whose migration was forced. This reinforced the need to discuss the activities and approaches with students, as well as a need for counsellor support. (Grayson 1997:42)

We had … had ‘open’ discussion sessions where the students told me very honestly how they felt about the course and about their expectations and mine. This had given me a very clear picture that these students were not only from different backgrounds, but were dealing with very stressful physical and emotional problems which affected their ability to learn and interact positively. (Muldoon 1997:18)

I began to uncover some of the reasons for the rejected activities. The students’ comments and their reactions in class indicated that discussions that revolved around cultural or social differences were not acceptable. (McPherson 1997a:29)
Involve students in identifying short and long-term lesson goals.

Do a topic survey to determine preferred topic areas.

Use a learning-styles questionnaire.

Get students to discuss their learning needs with each other in pairs or in groups.

Discuss with students what they think of certain activities.

Ask students what they feel they have learned as a result of a task or activity.

Ask students in which contexts they need to use English outside the classroom.

Ask students to report on their language use or difficulties in situations outside the classroom.

What Researchers Say

Even more than its results, the value of the topic questionnaire lay in the doing of it; in developing an awareness of the need for negotiation, and for sharing in, and ownership of, the course.

(Grayson 1997:40)

To teach effectively in a disparate classroom may require identifying learning strategies first and then incorporating that knowledge into the classroom activities.

(Quinn 1997:48)

[a questionnaire] was used as a ... starting point for developing students' awareness of their individual learning styles. ... [It] also stimulated a discussion on ... the question of which students spoke English outside the class. A student ... told us of a chain reaction he had started in his search for someone to talk to [which eventually involved many occupants from neighbouring flats having social contact with each other for the first time].

[His] story initiated an on-going sub-theme of discussion ... about 'how to be a good neighbour who'll do more than just say hello' and 'taking responsibility for making opportunities for yourself'.

(Grayson 1977:41)
What methodologies are best suited to teaching disparate groups of learners?

Findings

> It is important to be flexible in your methodologies, adopting those that are based on your exploration of learner needs, abilities and strategies. A ‘one method fits all’ approach is not realistic or effective.

> It is necessary to become familiar with a range of possible methods so that you can select from or integrate these in an appropriate way.

> You need to be prepared to negotiate not only your methodological approaches, but also your principles and values about course design and teaching methods, tasks and materials. Some learners will learn best in a way that does not fit in with your principles and values.

> Developing learners’ independent learning strategies may be even more critical for disparate groups than for others.

WHAT RESEARCHERS SAY

The key feature of disparate learner groups is that they all bring something different to the learning situation, and that expecting conformity to arise out of those differences because of a teaching method is to expect more than is reasonable.

(Quinn 1997:48)

…the students said they liked tests best of all, so I included daily spelling tests, although this went somewhat against my preferred style of teaching.

(Whitham 1997:35)

In teaching these multi-level classes, I used both small mixed-ability groups and similar-ability groups. In small mixed-ability groups the students were given roles to play which allowed them to make use of their strengths.

… Similar-ability groups can be an advantage as they save the teacher time in organisation.

(Goodman 1997:65)
Regularly choose an activity to use as the basis for gathering information about how students feel about the tasks you set them, and about the strategies they use when doing them.

Do a survey of task usefulness at some point in the course. Be sure to make students aware that the purpose of the task is to help meet their needs. Explain the relationship between the tasks and the curriculum requirements.

Have students compile and maintain portfolios of their written work. Portfolios are useful in providing students with evidence of their own learning progress.

Integrate strategies for learning into your teaching program. Help learners to be more conscious of what they are doing, and need to do, to tackle certain language tasks.

Try to read one book per month or term on a teaching methodology you are unfamiliar with. Think about how you could incorporate it into your usual classroom approach. Make a point of trying out a few ideas regularly.

Ways to develop independent learning strategies

- Conduct a survey with learners about how much they speak English outside the classroom. Set up a grid with contexts on one dimension (e.g., at children’s school) and days of the week on the other and provide space for students’ comments. Ask students to record on the grid the number of times they use English and to write comments about success or problems. This is useful as a means of gathering information about your students, but also as a focus for classroom discussion about the importance of using their English outside class.

- Set students English guided-speaking tasks outside the classroom. Be sure to prepare students for these tasks in class. Have them report back on their success.

- Make up a chart of situations for using English outside the classroom, and display it. Encourage students to add to the chart any other situations they have experienced.
Materials and activities

What materials will best meet the needs and interests of the whole group?

Findings

> Existing materials and activities can be adapted to cater for disparate levels in a group.

> Disparate learner groups can be catered for by adapting tasks rather than texts.

> Teachers need to be prepared for the fact that development or adaptation of materials will take extra time, at least initially.

> Teaching activities suitable for teaching and managing disparate groups include:
  - going from concrete, familiar and context dependent language to more abstract unfamiliar and decontextualised language
  - going from structured to more open-ended activities
  - modelling texts and activity types
  - varying activity types over a period
  - providing clear instructions
  - helping students with learning strategies
  - encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning.

> Learners may work more effectively and be more motivated when they chose their own materials and tasks.
Design multi-level tasks. Increase task difficulty in terms of concrete/abstract, context dependent/context independent, and familiar/unfamiliar dimensions. Explain how tasks can be carried out at two or three different levels and let students choose their own level. For example: for picture story sequences, provide complete sentences, sentence beginnings, verbs only and no sentences at all.

Control difficulty of activity by having some students work in pairs and some work alone.

Devise worksheets, or sets of worksheets, that have compulsory sections that you know every student will be able to do and non-compulsory sections that students can do if they want to. The notions of ‘compulsory’ and ‘non-compulsory’ are useful to overcome any self-esteem issues that might otherwise arise from giving students worksheets that contain different levels of difficulty.

Establish ways for students to check work themselves.

Model all activities (eg clozes, sentence completion, crosswords and other word games) before asking students to do them.

Proceed from more structured activities to more open-ended, communicative ones. During the lesson the weaker students can rely more on the structured support of the earlier activities.

The stronger students can take the opportunity to try out new language in open-ended activities.

Where appropriate, allow stronger learners to translate task instructions into their first language to help weaker students.

Teach study skills explicitly (eg using folders, doing homework, learning spelling, and correcting and checking own work).

Use the board for whole group activities. For example, write a whole text on the board, and read it aloud together. Rub out words and replace with dashes. Read it again putting in the missing words. Do this bit by bit until each word has been deleted. The weaker students are supported by memory and by the whole class working together.

Suggestions for the classroom

What Researchers say

I noticed the variety of approaches to using the [multi-level] materials which emerged when the students were given the chance to take control and work in a way they found personally effective. (McPherson 1997a:27)

Examples of multi-level tasks

In the following activity about weekend pursuits

- Level 1 students and Level 2 students work together:
  - Level 2 students ask questions of Level 1 students about weekend activities, complete information on a grid and write a short recount about their partner’s weekend.
  - Level 1 students answer questions from Level 2 students about weekend activities.
- Level 3 students work cooperatively to design a survey of the weekend activities of the whole class, complete the survey, draw up bar graphs of findings and present them to the class. (adapted from McPherson 1997b)

Use several versions of the same activity, for example:

- for sequencing activities provide complete sentences, partial sentences or phrases, or one or two words only. Do the same activity over a number of days, gradually increasing difficulty for each student.
- for cloze activities, provide no word options, provide word options but encourage learners not to use them, and provide word options and encourage them to use them. (adapted from Hambling 1997)
Example of independent task for low-level learners

> Develop sets of materials that one disparate group within the class can use independently. For example, for learners with little formal education and/or very limited literacy, you could develop materials around alphabet recognition, the family, signs, forms, picture stories. You need to make sure that learners are familiar with the materials and activity type so that they can use them independently.

(adapted from Huntington 1994:29)

Example of a self-activity check

> After completion of cloze activities, give students a copy of the complete text under which are two columns – one for new words and the other for meanings. Use the work of students who have completed the activity as a model for others. When using worksheets that ask questions about the text, ask questions orally first. Alternatively, put the answers at the bottom of the sheet. Have more able students fold over the bottom so they can’t see the answers. Allow less able students to copy answers if they need to. Spend time teaching students how to organise and use their folders so that they can find work when you are revising or recycling, or revise work themselves if they finish an activity. Make students responsible for checking their own spelling at the end of all written activities. The stronger students can do this, learn to spell any words they need to and then test each other while others are still finishing the tasks.

(adapted from Hambling 1997)
How do we encourage a feeling of unity in a class of disparate learners?

What is the best way to group learners?

Findings

> Positive classroom dynamics appear to be even more important in the teaching of disparate groups than in teaching other groups. Learners may be more affected (positively or negatively) – by, for example, physical classroom arrangements and learner groupings – than they might be in more homogenous groups.

> The concept of developing classroom dynamics and membership of a group can be a basis for language learning in itself, as well as a means of addressing the issue of teaching a disparate group.

> Assumptions that learners should be streamed or grouped according to language ability levels are simplistic. Groupings need to be flexible and diverse, and at the same time, based on deliberate and conscious choices (by teachers and learners) for particular learner purposes.

> Some learners are enthusiastic about working with others with different skills and abilities and incorporate this into their learning.
Do whole class activities about language learning strategies to foster group cohesion (e.g., ask students “What kind of language learner are you?” “What is learning a language like?” and “What do you feel like when you are speaking in a foreign language?”). Give them choices to tick.

Include whole class activities at least once each lesson to foster feelings of group unity and overcome group divisions.

Change the seating arrangements on a regular basis.

Look for unstructured opportunities for learners to get to know each other. For example, organise coffee breaks where you and/or your students bring in food on a regular basis.

Encourage a notion of competing against oneself rather than each other which may be a problem in disparate groups. Acknowledge, and encourage students to acknowledge, each other’s achievements.

If self-esteem is not an issue, try grouping students according to level for all or some work and give activities appropriate to the group ability. Be sure to explain why you are doing this. Take time to encourage collaboration (e.g., suggest strategies, assign roles, give only one worksheet). Monitor closely how the groups are working and whether there may be a need for changes in group composition. If self-esteem is an issue, such grouping may undermine confidence and affect group harmony.

Pair stronger students with weaker ones but be sure to teach stronger ones how to help so that they do not simply give weaker students the answers.

Set aside part of the class time (perhaps the last hour) for “contract” work, where students decide a learning focus or task that is appropriate to their needs and interests. This allows you to work with individual students while the rest of the class makes productive use of their time. It also gives students the chance to make decisions about their own learning and this can be very empowering.

Suggestions for the classroom

[The questionnaire on individual learning strategies] supported my goals for the course in terms of both language development and group dynamics … There was a sense of ‘openness’ which I had not experienced before.

(Shaw 1997:55, 59)

The students became very flexible, were happy to sit with any other students, were more prepared to interact with each other and enjoyed the challenge of finding new partners each time.

(Shaw 1997:57)

Ask students to write an ‘old lag’s’ letter. This is a letter from the experienced student to students who will be in the class next term. This gives students a sense of handing over and moving on and gives the teacher feedback about the classroom dynamics and activities and an opportunity to evaluate their language progress.

(Shaw 1997)

The grouping of students according to level made me more conscious of the needs of students at the middle and lower ends of the proficiency range.

(Prescott 1997:63)

The preference for mixed groups clearly gave students more scope for language use and they gained in confidence.

(Valeri 1997:39)
Collaborative teaching

What are the advantages of team teaching? How can we make it work?

Findings

- Teachers recognise the difficulty of exposing their classroom practices to others in collaborative teaching projects but overwhelmingly agree that they are valuable learning experiences.
- More teamed-based approaches to developing flexible methodologies and materials will enhance practices in catering for diverse needs.
- Getting together with other teachers in meetings or workshops to pool ideas, materials and approaches to teaching can provide a useful resource.

What Researchers say

There is a certain degree of vulnerability in sharing classroom practices, but I think it is one of the most important aspects of professional development.

(Clarkson 1997:91)

I had worked conscientiously with two groups of [disparate-level] students but I had worked in isolation. The project allowed me to identify and to state my uncertainties … and to draw on the experience and expertise of others to find appropriate solutions to my problems.

(Muldoon 1997:23)
WHAT RESEARCHERS say

We learned from each other and were able to observe different teaching styles. Working together encouraged ongoing discussions on the operation of the project and on the planning and selection of materials … Although it was difficult finding mutually suitable times and there were time pressures, these difficulties were outweighed by the positive aspects … It was a rewarding alternative to working in isolation. (Brooks bank and Carroll 1997:72)

… when the opportunity arose for three of us … to work together on the project, I was excited at the prospect of a shared focus … One of the greatest benefits … was a heightened professional relationship with my two colleagues … this shared experience enabled us to gain greater insight into our individual roles, our responsibilities and our expertise.

This project [drew] attention to the increased demand on the teacher in teaching a disparate learner group and the need for support and resources in teaching such a class. (Hatcher-Friel 1997:81. 84)

Suggestions for the classroom

> Develop shared banks of teaching materials at your centre. Set up a system whereby teachers can easily provide an extra copy for the ‘bank’ and others can easily find and use materials in it.

> Discuss classroom and institutional solutions for specific issues related to diverse groups.

> Trial team-teaching arrangements, perhaps for parts of the day or of the course only.

> Initiate an action research project with another teacher. You may choose to do this very informally. Or you may do it in such a way that it can be utilised as formal research (eg for study purposes).
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