

PECULIARITIES OF TEACHING ENGLISH ONLINE TO MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES

ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ВИКЛАДАННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ОНЛАЙН У РІЗНОРІВНЕВИХ ГРУПАХ

This article deals with the acute problem faced by teachers of technical higher education institutions when teaching English online to mixed-ability classes. The article aims at exploring the peculiarities of teaching English to mixed-ability classes online and identifying effective strategies and methods to tackle the problems. The article focuses on the importance of addressing the needs and abilities of students from diverse educational backgrounds in online English language teaching. It emphasizes the role of English teachers in improving learning outcomes and adapting learning process to the online environment. Taking into consideration the deficiency of system development of methods and approaches to teaching English online to mixed-ability classes, the following scientific research is focused on scrutinising all sorts of effective strategies used to facilitate learning process when staying online because of the war in Ukraine. The attempt to provide a comprehensive review of all challenges associated with the process of teaching English online to mixed-ability classes was undertaken. The article highlights the difficulties associated with online teaching, such as the problem of instruction differentiation for students with varying abilities. The possibility of using breakout rooms on Zoom to divide mixed-ability classes into smaller homogeneous subgroups, allowing for personalized instructions and enhanced student engagement, is examined. Technical challenges and time constraints that teachers may face in implementing this approach are mentioned. The article acknowledges the limitations of providing additional online support for students with lower abilities and emphasizes the importance of creating a friendly atmosphere in virtual classroom to enhance student engagement in the educational process. The article also highlights the limitations of online teaching in gaining non-verbal feedback from students. It acknowledges that teachers may not be able to observe students' facial expressions and body language effectively, leading to difficulties in assessing students' comprehension and adapting teaching strategies. As the solution of the problem the article suggests encouraging students to work with their cameras on to promote student engagement and a sense of connection among peers. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the importance of building rapport with students, which can be more challenging in an online environment. The article provides insights and recommendations for ESL teachers to enhance the quality of online English language teaching to mixed-ability classes. The article is of great help to all foreign language teachers interested in the possible ways to deal effectively with challenges associated with the necessity to teach English to mixed-ability classes online.

Key words: *mixed-ability classes, video conferencing platforms, higher educational institution, virtual classroom, non-verbal feedback, Zoom's breakout rooms.*

Дана стаття присвячена розгляду актуальної проблеми, з якою регулярно стика-

ються викладачі вищих технічних навчальних закладів під час онлайн викладання англійської мови у різнорівневих групах. Метою статті є дослідження особливостей онлайн викладання англійської мови у різнорівневих групах та визначення ефективних стратегій і методів вирішення існуючих проблем. У статті підкреслюється роль викладачів англійської мови у покращенні результатів навчання та адаптації процесу навчання до онлайн середовища. Беручи до уваги недостатній розвиток системних методів і підходів до викладання англійської мови в режимі онлайн для різнорівневих груп, дане наукове дослідження зосереджене на детальному вивченні всіх видів ефективних стратегій, які використовуються для полегшення процесу навчання онлайн. У статті обговорюються труднощі, пов'язані з онлайн викладанням, наприклад, проблема диференціації навчальних матеріалів для студентів з різними рівнями володіння мовою. Вивчається можливість використання сесійних зал платформ Zoom для поділу різнорівневих груп на менші, однорідні за здібностями підгрупи, що дозволяє надавати персоналізовані інструкції та сприяє кращому залученню студентів до навчання. Згадуються технічні проблеми та часові обмеження, з якими викладачі можуть зіткнутися під час впровадження цього підходу. У статті визнаються обмеження для надання додаткової підтримки для студентів з нижчими здібностями та наголошується на важливості створення сприятливої атмосфери у віртуальному класі для підвищення активності студентів і покращення процесу навчання. Стаття також підкреслює обмеження онлайн викладання в отриманні невербального зворотного зв'язку від студентів. В статті визначається, що викладачі можуть бути не в змозі ефективно спостерігати за невербальними засобами спілкування, що призводить до труднощів у оцінці розуміння матеріалу студентами та неможливості адаптації стратегій навчання. Як вирішення проблеми в статті пропонується заохочувати студентів працювати з увімкненими камерами, щоб сприяти залученню студентів до навчального процесу і відчуттю емоційного зв'язку між одногрупниками. У статті розглядаються рекомендації для викладачів англійської мови щодо підвищення якості онлайн викладання у різнорівневих групах. Стаття дуже допоможе всім викладачам іноземних мов, які цікавляться можливими способами ефективного вирішення проблем, пов'язаних із необхідністю викладання англійської мови онлайн у різнорівневих групах.

Ключові слова: *неоднорідні групи, платформи для відеоконференцій, вищий навчальний заклад, віртуальний клас, невербальний зворотний зв'язок, сесійні зали платформи Zoom.*

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Problem statement. It goes without saying that English teachers of technical higher education institutions have to deal with mixed-ability classes, where students have different abilities and levels of language skills. This is a major pressing problem that English teachers face regularly and is considered to be the most significant. There are a lot of scientific research articles devoted to the problem of teaching English to mixed-ability groups. However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 and war in Ukraine has dramatically changed daily working routine of ESL teachers. The rapid transition to online teaching due to the pandemic and war in Ukraine has exacerbated the problem, as teaching English online to mixed-ability classes has become even more challenging and tough experience to ESL teachers. This article aims at considering peculiarities of teaching English online and exploring all the possible solutions of the problem associated with the necessity to teach English to mixed-ability classes online.

The purpose of this article is to take a closer look at challenges of teaching to mixed-ability classes online. We can assume that, unfortunately, this problem is of the utmost importance to teachers in higher technical education institutions. Due to the fact that students today tend to come from various educational backgrounds and may range dramatically in their learning styles, motivation, and speed of knowledge acquisition, this issue is becoming increasingly prevalent in all types of educational institutions. Switch to online education has made things worse. It is important to emphasize that the role of a teacher working in an online environment is to improve learning outcomes, make the most of technological advancements, and make the transition from traditional classroom settings to online work as seamless as possible. The research focuses on gathering empirical data through rigorous research methods to identify the most effective and efficient teaching strategies that can be used in online English language teaching to mixed-ability classes exploring the potential use of technology and other innovative solutions to enhance the quality and effectiveness of online English language teaching for such classes.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Despite the importance of this problem, there is a lack of scientific research into effective strategies and methods for teaching English to mixed-ability classes online as the problem has recently deteriorated because of the necessity to switch to online education. It is of vital importance to develop effective and comprehensive online teaching strategies that can meet diverse needs and abilities of students of mixed-ability classes. The investigation should aim at identifying the specific challenges and barriers faced by students in mixed-ability classes when learning English online, as well as the strategies that have been successful applied by teachers in overcoming these problems.

Ultimately, it is of vital importance to provide evidence-based recommendations and guidelines that can be used by ESL teachers to improve the quality of online English language teaching to mixed-ability classes, especially during times of war and crisis when traditional modes of education are disrupted.

Presentation of the main material. Let's take a closer look at peculiarities and difficulties associated with teaching ESL to mixed-ability classes online and consider all the possible ways to tackle the problem. The necessity of teaching English to students with mixed abilities is a challenge that has always been present in traditional classrooms. However, the shift to online teaching has made this task even more challenging. There are several problems associated with teaching English to students with mixed abilities online, and in this article, we will explore some of the most significant ones.

One of the most evident problems with teaching English to students with mixed abilities online is that it is much more complicated to differentiate instructions teachers give to students. In a traditional classroom setting, it is not a problem for a teacher to divide students into subgroups according to their abilities and tailor the lessons to meet the needs of every single student. However, effective differentiation of instructions in an online environment can pose significant difficulties and is associated with urgent problems in tracking the progress of individual students and assessing their learning needs. Thus, all of that makes it challenging to provide personalized instruction. Based on own observations it is necessary to point out that the problem mentioned above can be partially solved by using breakout room feature available on video conferencing platform Zoom. Breakout rooms make it possible for teachers to divide large mixed-ability groups into smaller subgroups with similar abilities in order to enhance student engagement and overall learning outcomes. With smaller groups, teachers can provide more personalized feedback and individual attention to each student, addressing their unique needs. It is quite understandable that ESL students need ample opportunities to practice speaking skills, which can be rather challenging in a large group. Breakout rooms allow students to interact with their peers in a more relaxed and comfortable setting, enabling them to develop their speaking skills at their own pace [3, p. 250].

However, it is necessary to mention that sometimes it would be beneficial to break large mixed-ability class into smaller heterogeneous groups to adopt a peer-assisted learning strategy. The proper choice of pairs for application of peer tutoring strategy results in the groundbreaking increase of students' motivation and achievements [2, p. 40].

Although we have to admit that compared with the work in the traditional classroom, breaking students into small subgroups on Zoom is much harder, takes

more time and requires teacher's dazzling technical mastery. Based on our experience we may claim that, unfortunately, not always teachers working on Zoom have enough time to choose the option of breaking students into subgroups not randomly, but according to their skills and abilities.

The other peculiarity of online teaching that has to be taken into consideration is that online learning can be isolating for students, particularly those with lower abilities. In a traditional classroom, students can collaborate in completing some tasks, interact with their peers, and ask their teacher for help when needed. It is well known fact that weaker students may require additional support from teachers or peers that is more challenging (if possible) to provide online. It is quite understandable that in an online environment, students can feel isolated and disconnected from their peers and teachers, which can make it harder for them to engage with the content and learn effectively.

Moreover, there is another vital problem that arises from the unwillingness of students to work with their cameras on. Being in a traditional classroom setting experienced teachers always pay attention to non-verbal signs that can be interpreted as a feedback on whether students clearly understand the material that is being taught or not. By being able to see and assess students' reactions, facial expressions, and body language, teachers can easily identify when a student appears to be confused or disengaged and adjust their teaching accordingly. It is the visual feedback that enables teachers to promptly react and provide additional explanations or clarification, ensuring that students grasp the rules being explained. It also allows teachers to adapt their teaching strategies on the spot, tailoring their approach to suit the needs of mixed-ability class students.

Based on our observations there is hardly any possibility to solve this problem by demanding from students to work with their cameras on, since virtual classroom differs dramatically from the traditional one. To notice, analyze, understand and respond to students' reactions and non-verbal feedbacks is close to impossible for teachers working on Zoom or other video conferencing platforms, compared to a traditional classroom setting, where teachers can easily scan the classroom and pick up on minor clues, that can give away some misunderstanding among weaker students. That is quite understandable as the limited screen space and varying video quality on video conferencing platforms make it difficult to observe all students simultaneously. The grid view may only display a limited number of participants at a time, and small video thumbnails may not provide enough visibility to capture nuanced facial expressions or body language. Additionally, technical issues such as internet lag or video freezing can further hinder the real-time observation of students' non-verbal feedback. These limitations make it

challenging for teachers to gain insights into individual students' comprehension, or engagement based on visual feedback. It implies that the only solution of this problem is to constantly ask students whether they fully grasp the material that is being taught and to create the favorable friendly atmosphere in the virtual classroom where everyone feels free to ask questions for clarification of issues that are not completely understood.

Despite the fact that it is nearly impossible mission for teachers to get some non-verbal feedback from students working on video-conferencing platforms, it is highly recommended to motivate students to work with the cameras on as it may have a lot of advantages such as a sense of accountability and active participation among students. When students know that their cameras are on, they are more likely to remain focused and attentive during the class. They become aware that their engagement and understanding are being observed (though as we've discussed above it is far from being feasible), which can motivate them to actively contribute to discussions, ask questions, and seek clarification when needed. To back up the idea of the necessity to encourage engagement of all students of the mixed-ability class in the educational process let's quote Benjamin Franklin who wrote "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." [4].

Working with cameras on also promotes a sense of connection and community in the virtual classroom. By seeing classmates' faces, students can develop a stronger sense of connection to their peers, even in a remote learning environment. This visual connection helps create a supportive friendly atmosphere, allowing students to interact and engage with each other more naturally, just like in a traditional classroom setting. In our humble opinion that is the task that is considered to be the top priority for every teacher working online.

Yet another peculiarity of teaching English online to mixed-ability classes is the problem to build a rapport with the students. Rapport is the establishment of an emotional bond with a group of people, characterized by the presence of mutual positive emotional relationships and a certain measure of mutual understanding. It goes without saying that the ability to establish rapport with different people ensures success in almost any field of activity, and the learning process is not an exception. It is rapport that allows teachers to evoke desired reactions from students. It is obvious that great teachers are those who can easily establish rapport with any student and thereby facilitate the transition to a better understanding of a subject. Such teachers get along well with their students, and good relationship in its turn makes learning process easier.

In a traditional classroom, it is much easier for an experienced teacher to build good relationships

with any student of a mixed-ability class and provide individual support and feedback. However, in an online environment, it can be more challenging for teachers to establish personal connections with their students, particularly if deal with large groups of students. Thus, it is essential for teachers to find innovative ways to address these challenges to ensure that all students can benefit from online learning opportunities. Having cameras on can also be beneficial in keeping up better rapport with students and promoting mutual understanding.

Conclusions. All in all, it is important to emphasize that English language teachers working online with mixed-ability classes must employ a combination of strategies tailored to each individual student in the virtual ESL classroom in order to facilitate a comprehensive educational experience. By adopting the appropriate methods and strategies described above, ESL teachers can guarantee that their

students receive a high-quality education regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves in. It is crucial to conduct further research and develop evidence-based recommendations to support ESL teachers in enhancing the quality of online English language instruction for mixed-ability classes.

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