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Exploring Effective Ways
to Teach a Multi-Level Movie Course

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1. Introduction

Teaching multi-level classes poses a significant challenge to many teachers. However, multi-level instruction may be the only way to sustain a language program under a tight budget. According to studies by Strasheim (1989) and Masuyama and Shea (2007), it is quite common to combine two or three levels of foreign language classes into one in small high schools or even at state universities in the U.S. At Japanese universities multi-level instruction is quite common, especially in elective English classes. Given this situation, it is worthwhile to explore effective ways to teach multi-level classes. This paper examines some problems that may arise when teaching a multi-level English class using movies and suggests ways to deal with the needs of students when designing course goals and lesson plans. More specifically, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

(1) What should be the focus of a multi-level movie class?
(2) How can we keep all the students engaged in classroom tasks and help them understand better?
(3) Which method of assessment would be most appropriate for a multi-level movie class?

2. Challenges of a multi-level class

A multi-level class, generally, refers to a mixed-ability class, but in ESL education it can include students with varied L1 literacy skills, socio, cultural and educational backgrounds, motivation, attitudes and intelligence (Kouka, 2006; Pham Phu Quynh Na, 2007). This can be especially true in adult refugee programs in the U.S. where teachers face challenges of meeting the diverse language needs of their learners in a single classroom (Mathews-Aydinli and Horne, 2006). In Japanese colleges, students may not be as diverse as those described above, but nonetheless there may be a wide discrepancy in students' English abilities within a class. For example, students' English entry levels differ greatly depending on their English education success in junior and senior high schools. In some cases, even if English classes were streamed based on standardized test results, foreign students enrolled in English classes may be much more proficient in communication skills than Japanese students. Brown (2001) explains that a varied level of competencies exist not only in class but also "within each skill . . . and by context" (p.198).

The topic of mixed-level education is often discussed in relation to classroom management, materials design and teaching challenges. One of the challenges often associated with mixed-level teaching is time-consuming and demanding lesson preparation, because "one size fits all" type of instruction doesn't work in a multi-level class (DelliCarpini, 2006). Defining unified goals and choosing or making appropriate teaching materials require careful preparation. Kouka lists several other problems, including ways to ensure students' effective learning, keeping students engaged and interested, and checking each student's progress.

Another challenge in a multi-level class is assessment. Learner assessment in a multi-level class is quite complicated. As we know, students enter and leave the course at various English proficiency levels, and

therefore it would not be fair to assess them solely based on their language performance. Lassche (2008) writes:

> Conscientious teachers are compelled to organize their methods of assessment in a way that is responsive to the diversity of both motivation and abilities among their students in order to reach 'fair assessment,' whether is it formative or summative. (p. 6)

Brown (2001) explains several alternative assessment options to traditional test-based assessment, one of which is portfolios. According to Genesee and Upshur (1996), "a portfolio is a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates to students and others their efforts, progress and achievements in given areas." (as cited in Brown, p. 418) Portfolios seem to address the problems of assessment discussed above in that students' learning process and efforts are not left out in the final assessment. Brown notes that clear guidelines and procedures are important in adopting a portfolio so that students are clear about what they are expected to produce in their portfolios.

Suggestions for multi-level instruction include needs assessment, group work and/or project-based work, and the use of self-access materials (Mathews-Aydini and Van Horne, 2006). In a mixed-level class, students' expectations, interests, and goals may vary as much as their language abilities, and therefore assessing individual needs and goals can contribute to adjusting the course design and lesson materials. Mathews-Aydini and Horne note that standardized testing, interviews, and observation can be utilized for such needs assessment. Class surveys or interviews can be done at the beginning of the course and throughout the term to assess each student's goals, needs, and interests. Kouka suggests differentiating tasks according to the learner's level. For example, a teacher may prepare two levels of reading exercises to accommodate different levels of students or prepare additional challenging exercises for the more able students. Self-access materials are also recommended by Shank and Terrill (1995) in

mixed-level education. Shank and Terrill point out that the teacher has to make sure that the students are self-sufficient in accomplishing activities using self-access materials.

3. Addressing a Wide Range of Students in a Movie Class

At Seigakuin University, Cinema III is offered to students who have completed Cinema II. It is a multi-level elective course that meets once a week for 15 weeks. In Cinema III, movies are used as aids to teach English and culture to students of all proficiencies. Three movies were covered in this course, but all the classroom activities reported on this study refer to only one movie, *Witness*. In this study, a total of 23 students from two Cinema III classes were examined. The students had TOEFL scores that ranged from 220 to 450. Because of such a wide range in their English proficiency, it was difficult to design teaching materials appropriate for every student. If the teaching materials were set for the higher level, it would be too difficult for the rest of the class. Taking the wide gap in English proficiency within the class into consideration, several steps were taken to deal with English proficiency differences and to help weaker students as well as to encourage those who needed more challenges. These steps will be discussed below in relation to the research questions given at the beginning:

(1)   What should be the focus of a multi-level movie class?

In a mixed-level class, it is often difficult for lower level students to participate in class when language tasks are too difficult for them. In order for a program to succeed, the course needs to be designed in the way that all students can participate actively in classroom tasks. Taking students' high interest in movies and culture into consideration, it was decided to place more focus on culture and movie background than language.

Placing focus on background knowledge has theoretical support as well. The role of background knowledge in L2 reading comprehension is widely researched today. It has been said that background knowledge, or prior knowledge, facilitates students' comprehension of the related text (Urquhart and Weir, 1998). Cognitive psychologists explain this comprehension process using schema theory. Alderson (2000) explains schema theory as follows:

> (Schema theory) accounts for the acquisition of knowledge and the interpretation of text through the activation of schemata: networks of information stored in the brain which act as filters for incoming information." (p. 17)

Alderson comments further on the relationship between subject familiarity and comprehension:

> . . . . . it would appear obvious that readers will find it easier to read texts in areas they are familiar with, for example those they have studied, than those which they are not or have not, even if their knowledge is more general than, or different from, the exact content of the text. (p.44)

Long (1989) reported on the effects of background knowledge on L2 listening comprehension. He cautions that not all studies showed positive effects, but says that "appropriate schemata can help listeners fill in missing information, or allow them to listen at a less attentive level and still comprehend the message." (p.1)

(2) How can we keep all the students engaged in classroom tasks and help them understand better?

a. Language Support

For successful student engagement in classroom activities, we must assume that students are interested in the activities, and more importantly, that these activities are within their linguistic abilities. Therefore, discussion of the language issue is of value. My main concern was how to assist weaker learners to comprehend the reading materials. One solution for this language problem was to provide bilingual task sheets with guided questions. By doing so, it was hoped that these activities would be more comprehensible to lower level of students. Moreover, there was clear focus on the kind of information students needed to find and also, students could have language support when needed. These activities were designed for the middle level of class with occasional challenging questions. Students were also able to answer questions in the language of their choice, so more proficient students answered in English while weaker students answered in Japanese, or in some cases all students answered in English if the tasks were manageable.

b. Use of Japanese Subtitles

Related to the language issue is the use of Japanese subtitles. Whether or not to show movies with Japanese subtitles may be divided among teachers. Perhaps, the best solution to this problem is to ask students how they feel about this issue at the beginning of the course. At the beginning of the course, this question was asked and the majority of students in this study answered that they preferred the movie shown in English with Japanese subtitles. Therefore, the movie was shown with Japanese subtitles for the most part. For listening exercises, the subtitles were turned off, and English subtitles were used for reviewing the answers.

c. Fostering Student Engagement

Designing tasks that promote students' engagement is something with which all teachers are concerned. Matier (2010) claims that individual written responses are as effective as group work or paired responses. He explains that students produce quick written responses to some questions on a sheet of paper which are collected for instant teacher feedback. Matier notes that student engagement is fostered when "everyone is accountable for their own thinking." (p.1) Vernon (2006) suggests whole group activity followed by leveled group activity in which reading tasks are modified to fit the level of each group. In addition to group activities, many hands-on activities, projects, open-ended activities with reference to students' opinion are suggested in ELT sites.

In this course a combination of the previously mentioned strategies were used to encourage students' positive engagement, namely whole group activities, hands-on activities using computers for research, individual activities on movie comprehension tasks, and paired responses.

d. Use of Self-access Materials

Hands-on activities using computers are quite stimulating for students. However, many language teachers feel that authentic materials on the Internet may be too difficult for most students in a mixed-level class. Care must be taken when choosing articles before designing classroom tasks. One way to alleviate this problem is to use ELT websites. For example, "ESL materials, Amish lifestyle" inserted in the Yahoo search engine will yield several great websites appropriate for most students.

On the other hand, if we could utilize authentic resources on the Internet in a meaningful way, students would have more opportunities to read and learn about related topics. Dudeney and Hockly (2007) note on the use of authentic websites:

. . . . . Many teachers tend to steer clear of authentic websites. . . . .

believing that their students will find them too difficult. But, as with all authentic materials, the level and language challenges posed by these sites can be largely mitigated by the type of task you expect your learners to carry out. A well-designed task will allow your learners to deal with authentic sites, guiding them through not only the text, but also the layout and navigation problems that may otherwise impact on their learning experience. (p. 28)

Dudeney and Hockly suggest that authentic sites need to be evaluated before use by visiting the sites and reading the content to make sure that they are appropriate for class use. Sites with "simple structure" and "smaller chucks of text per page" may be more appropriate for ESL students. (p. 29).

In this class research skills were taught so that students would be able to obtain information related to the cultural issues and movie background. Using self-access materials, such as websites, students were able to learn much about the movie. There are a variety of movie databases, such as Yahoo Movies and Internet Movie Database. In this class, these databases were used to search for movie information, because the language and web structure in these databases are simple and easy to understand. Since Japanese students are not familiar with English websites, the first class was allotted for orientation of these databases. When students became more familiar with these databases, they read movie summaries, user reviews, cast information, and additional information such as directors/producers, etc. available in these databases. Classroom tasks were generated with this information in mind. (See sample #1) With teacher demonstration and individual practice, students were able to complete the movie information task sheet.

ESL sites were also used in this class. Students read an article written for ESL audience called "The Amish Community" and completed the task sheets. (See samples #2 and #3) Some ESL sites have not only reading materials but also reading exercises constructed by the contributing

teacher. The only drawback is that there are not as many ESL sites as there are authentic sites.

Dudeney and Hockly suggest many different sites. Ask.com, which gives 1~2 lines of quick answer to your questions, and About.com are very useful sites. Both of these sites have simple texts, which are easily manageable. In this class About.com was used because information provided on this site was a little more thorough than Ask.com. When an article had several paragraphs, only one paragraph appropriate for the reading exercise was chosen at first (See sample #4), but later on students read a little more. At the beginning of the course, as whole class activities, students were assigned specific sites and read the same article. Later on when students were more able, they engaged in individual activities at their own pace. Some of these research activities were also assigned as homework so that weaker students had more time to prepare. This is where advanced students could have more challenges as well. They were encouraged to read more articles, some of which were a little longer or perhaps more difficult.

When students are introduced to authentic sites step by step and become able to complete appropriate tasks using these sites, they gain confidence.

e. Recycling Information

In this course, the focus was placed on learning culture and movie background. It was important to design activities so that cultural infor-mation learned in research activities would be helpful when completing movie comprehension exercises as well as doing listening activities. In other words, listening activities were designed to reinforce the under-standing of the cultural information students read about in the previous reading exercises. This made it easier for students to complete the listening activities. In this class movie clips of short dialogues were used for dialogue completion exercises. These exercises can be made more challenging by leaving the whole sentence out rather than a few words.

(See example #5) For more challenge, summary completion exercises were also provided. For these exercises students listened to dialogues and completed the missing information. (See example #6) Inference exercises were perhaps more difficult, because the answers were not spelled out clearly in the movie, but logical conclusion could be made. Weaker students gave answers in Japanese. (See example #8)

(3) Which method of assessment would be most appropriate for a multi-level class?

In a mixed level class, fair assessment is difficult. As Brown and Lassche argued, assessment solely based on their language performance is unfair since beginner students are at disadvantage. In order to assess students' participation, effort, understanding and learning process, portfolio assessment was used in this study.

At the beginning of the course, the concept of portfolio assessment was explained to the students. In this study, the portfolio included the following:

1. Cover page
2. Table of Content
3. Movie Information Sheet
4. Research Task Sheets: Amish Culture and Lifestyle
5. Movie Comprehension Exercises
6. Listening Exercises
7. Quizzes
8. Movie Feedback

The content of the portfolio and the method of assessment were explained in detail. Evaluation was based on the quality of the portfolio, which included all classroom activities. Each task sheet in the portfolio was graded for quality as well as thoroughness. Answers given in English or

Japanese had equal points, and the more thorough and well-researched answers received higher points. Advanced students tended to score higher on the listening activities, but weaker students were able to do well in other activities, such as completing movie information, researching background information and providing movie feedback.

4. Student Survey

4. 1 Survey Questions

To investigate students' views on the classroom activities and their comprehension of the movie, a survey was administered at the end of the semester. The survey questions and responses were as follows:
(N=23)

Comprehension
1. Did you understand the movie?
   Yes, very well (13); Yes most of it (10); No, not very well (0);
   No, not at all (0)
2. Did you understand Amish culture?
   Yes, very well (12); Yes, most of it (10); No, not very well (1);
   No, not at all (0)

Subtitles
3. Did you think Japanese subtitles were good for this class?
   Yes (18); English subtitles would be better (5)

Classroom activities
4. Do you think that researching the background information helped you better understand the movie?
   Yes, very much (21); Neither yes nor no; (1); No answer (1)

5. What did you think about the research activities and task sheets?
   - I tended to remember more when I researched it.
   - I didn't have much confidence in doing these activities but am glad that I could complete them.
   - These activities were very helpful in understanding the culture and the movie.
   - I learned much more about the Amish than I would have by only watching the movie
   - Some information on the Internet was too difficult to understand. I would have liked it in Japanese.
6. What did you think about the amount of listening exercises?
   Too much (0); Just right amount (17); not enough (6)
7. What did you think about unit tests?
   - They were challenging, but reasonable.
   - They were good for reviewing.
   - The test questions were very good.
   - I liked them because the coverage was limited.
8. Which of these is the most appropriate for the task sheets?
   No Japanese support (2); English with some Japanese support (10); All in Japanese (11)

Effectiveness of this class
9. What did this class help to improve?
   Background knowledge, reading skills, listening skills, overall English skills, research skills
10. Did you think this class was effective for all levels of students?
   Yes (22); Depends on students (1)

Assessment
11. What did you think about the portfolio assessment?
   Positive comment (21);
   Easier to review, less stressful, motivating, easier to make up

for absences; good assessment of students' efforts; less time constraint; more helpful for students; easier to concentrate

Neutral comment (2)

Wanted to know how I would have done on the final exam; don't know

4. 2 Discussion

The survey results show that students understood the movie and Amish culture better as a result of the research activities done in class. 22 students thought that they contributed to their understanding of the movie and the background culture. One student, who didn't understand Amish culture, was the only student who also gave a neutral answer to question #4 (If background information helps understand the movie better) and #10 (If this class is effective for all levels of students). This student was clearly an outlier in this study. This student had very poor attendance and this was probably the cause.

As for the Japanese support, the responses seemed to be influenced by the level of their English proficiency. Half of the students preferred all the questions in Japanese, while most of the other half said bilingual questions were good. Perhaps because of the Japanese language support in the task sheets, the majority of the students felt that the class would be beneficial to all levels of students. It was interesting to note that students' views on the benefits of this class varied. Some said listening skills and overall English ability, but others said research skills, or background knowledge. In reality, probably a combination of these improved.

The students also thought that the portfolio assessment was good. This was probably because students were prepared for this type of assessment at the beginning of the course, and students were held accountable for their work. Perhaps, in other classes some weak students have no idea how well or badly they are doing until they receive their grades, but in this system of assessment, students keep track of all their

work and are held responsible. So, this is effective in nurturing their responsibility and helping them monitor their own study and time.

5. Conclusion

This study examined some challenges of multi-level education and reported the approaches taken to teach a multi-level movie course at a university. It is important to design classroom tasks that will keep students engaged and motivated to learn. The following tips may help teachers teach a multi-level class:

(1) Keep classroom tasks simple

We need to keep all students in perspective when making comprehension questions or research questions. It would be better to add a few challenging questions for higher level of students.

(2) Make greater use of self-access materials

ESL sites as well as authentic sites with short and simple language structure are recommended. When tasks are well designed, students can process information more easily. Assign some activities as homework to allow more time, especially for beginner students.

(3) Make the reading and listening tasks complement each other for better comprehension

When students learn about the Amish culture in a reading task, the information and vocabulary items are recycled when they do listening activities on the same topic.

(4) Give Japanese support when needed

Authentic English in a movie is sometimes beyond the abilities of the ESL audience. It would be impossible for students to comprehend all that is said in a movie. However with guided

questions and some Japanese support, students can understand much of the movie.

(5) Make ongoing assessment of students' performance throughout the semester

It is important to keep monitoring students' work throughout the semester, giving feedback, and checking their comprehension. By doing so, we can prevent students from getting far behind. Also, students have more opportunities to improve their performance.

More teachers may face the challenges of teaching multi-level classes in the future since student enrollment at Japanese universities is on the decline as the18-year-old population is decreasing. With the right attitude and carefully planned teaching materials, and perhaps some flexibility, multi-level education can be successful.

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Appendix

Sample activity #1

Complete the movie information sheet using Yahoo Movies or IMDb.

Witness, starring _____ and _____ , was released in _____ .
It was directed by _____ and produced by _____ . The main
characters are _____ and _____ . In the movie, Samuel,
played by _____ , witnesses a _____ , and the police officer,
played by _____ , helps solve this case. The movie received (high/low)
ratings from movie viewers.

Sample activity #2

Read the online article "The Amish Community"
(http://www.eslhandouts.com/materials/the_amish.pdf) and answer the
following questions.

1. Where did the Amish come from?
2. Where do many of them live now?
3. Do the Amish live a modern or a traditional lifestyle?
4. Do the Amish have a carefree life or a strict life?

Sample activity #3

Read the article "The Amish Community" and answer the following questions about their lifestyle.

1. Do the Amish own cars? (yes   no)
2. Can the Amish go to the doctor's? (yes   no)
3. Are there refrigerators in their kitchens? (yes   no)
4. Do the Amish have churches? (yes   no)
5. Do the Amish houses have carpets? (yes   no)
6. Are the Amish allowed to play sports? (yes   no)

Sample activity #4

Read the article and answer the questions below.

The family is the most important social unit in the Amish culture. Large families with seven to ten children are common. Chores are clearly divided by sexual role in the Amish home - the man usually works on the farm, while the wife does the washing, cleaning, cooking, and other household chores. There are exceptions, but typically the father is considered the head of the Amish household. German is spoken in the home, though English is also taught in school. Amish marry Amish - no intermarriage is allowed. Divorce is not permitted and separation is very rare.
(http://pittsburgh.about.com/cs/pennsylvania/a/amish_2.htm)

Are these statements true or false?
1. The Amish can only marry other Amish. (T F)
2. The Amish can divorce. (T F)
3. The Amish generally have a large family. (T F)
4. The Amish speak German at home. (T F)
5. Household chores are always shared by the husband and the wife. (T F)

Sample #5

Listen and complete the conversation.

Grandfather: It's not _____ way.
John: But it's _____ way.
Grandfather: Book, No!
Tourist: Check this out. Here's another man.
Amish Man: It's _____ , Book.
Tourist: He's gonna hit you with his Bible.
John: You are making a _____

Sample #6

Listen to the dialogue and complete the missing information.

What is unique about Amish clothing?

Their coats have no _____ . They have _____ and _____ instead.

Sample #7

Listening Task: Shunning
Listen to what Rachel's father-in-law says about shunning and Rachel's response.

   1. If Rachel is shunned, can her father-in-law eat dinner with her?
      (yes   no)
   2. Does Rachel think that she will be shunned? (yes   no)

Sample #8

Listening Task: Making an Inference

Watch this movie clip and answer the question.

Why was Rachel's father-in-law upset when he saw Rachel and John dancing?