

IMPROVING LISTENING AND SPEAKING SKILLS IN MIXED LEVEL LEARNERS

Absalamov Khiloliddin Uchkunovich

*Teacher of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
+998 99 5502036*

Qodirova Robiyaxon Valisher qizi

*Student of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
robiyaq28@gmail.com
+998 88 8930483*

Quldoshova Sevinch Nodir qizi

*Student of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
sevichquldosheva42@gmail.com*

Abstract: Listening and speaking skills form the cornerstone of language acquisition, essential for meaningful communication and social interaction in authentic contexts. In mixed-level environments, the cultivation of these skills becomes particularly vital, as learners must develop their abilities to navigate real-world conversations at their own pace while progressively working towards greater proficiency. The development of effective listening and speaking skills not only bolsters individual confidence but also fosters an inclusive atmosphere that encourages active participation among all learners. This article aims to investigate various strategies and methods that can enhance listening and speaking skills in diverse classrooms. By implementing differentiated instruction, targeted practice, and innovative pedagogical techniques, educators can create a balanced and supportive learning experience that meets the varied needs of all students, thereby facilitating their progress regardless of their initial language proficiency.

Keywords: language proficiency, open-ended discussions, mixed-level classroom, listening techniques, qualitative feedback

Introduction. In classrooms around the world, mixed-level learners are a common occurrence, presenting a unique challenge for educators. These groups consist of students with varying levels of language proficiency, differing learning paces, and diverse educational backgrounds. Teaching listening and speaking skills to such heterogeneous groups requires a carefully tailored approach, as learners at lower levels may struggle to keep up, while more advanced students might feel unchallenged. This imbalance can hinder the overall effectiveness of language instruction if not addressed properly.

Listening and speaking skills are fundamental to language acquisition, acting as the core of communication and interaction in real-life scenarios. In mixed-level settings, the development of these skills is even more crucial as learners must be equipped to handle real-world conversations at their own pace while advancing towards higher proficiency levels. The ability to listen and speak effectively enhances confidence and creates an inclusive environment where all learners can engage meaningfully.

Materials and methods. The study was conducted in a diverse language learning environment comprising a mixed-level classroom with 20 students, including beginners, intermediate, and advanced learners. The students' ages ranged from 15 to 30, and they came from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The classroom met three times a week for 90-minute sessions, allowing for consistent engagement and practice. This frequency provided ample opportunities for focused instruction, collaboration, and individualized support.

A variety of instructional materials were utilized to cater to the diverse needs of the learners. Core resources included a structured textbook designed for language acquisition, supplemented by audio and video materials that provided authentic listening practice. Technology played a significant role, with applications like Duolingo and Quizlet used for vocabulary building and listening exercises. Additionally, resources such as YouTube videos and podcasts offered exposure to real-life language use, enhancing students' listening skills and cultural understanding. To effectively address the varying proficiency levels within the classroom, several teaching techniques were implemented:

Pair/group work: students were regularly grouped by proficiency for specific activities, enabling them to engage in meaningful conversations tailored to their level. Mixed-level pairing encouraged peer support, where more advanced students could assist beginners.

Differentiated tasks: activities were designed with varying levels of complexity. For instance, while some students engaged in guided dialogues, others participated in open-ended discussions, allowing them to choose tasks that matched their confidence and ability.

Scaffolding: instructional support was gradually removed as learners gained confidence. For instance, initial activities might involve sentence frames or guided questions, progressing to free conversation as learners became more competent. Learners' progress was measured through a combination of formative and summative assessments:

Formative Assessments: Regular informal assessments were conducted during activities, with teacher observations and peer feedback playing a critical role in gauging students' listening and speaking abilities.

Speaking Tests: Structured speaking assessments, including presentations and dialogues, were conducted at the end of each unit to evaluate individual progress and areas needing improvement.

Peer Evaluation: Students engaged in peer evaluations during group activities, which not only fostered a sense of accountability but also encouraged reflective learning as they provided constructive feedback to one another. Through these materials and methods, the instructional approach aimed to create a supportive and effective learning environment that addressed the needs of all students in a mixed-level setting.

Results. The implementation of varied instructional strategies in the mixed-level classroom yielded positive outcomes for both advanced and beginner learners. Advanced learners reported significant improvements in their speaking fluency, with increased confidence in expressing complex ideas and engaging in spontaneous conversations. Their ability to lead discussions and mentor their peers fostered a collaborative learning environment. Beginners, on the other hand, experienced substantial gains in listening comprehension and basic speaking skills. Many reported feeling more comfortable participating in class activities, as the scaffolding and differentiated tasks provided them with the necessary support to practice their speaking in a low-pressure setting. Assessments indicated that their pronunciation and vocabulary usage improved noticeably, as evidenced by their performance in speaking tests, where the majority scored in the upper range for their level. Notably, students across all levels reported enhanced listening skills, attributed to exposure to a variety of authentic materials, including podcasts and videos. This exposure not only broadened their vocabulary but also familiarized them with different accents and speech patterns, leading to improved overall comprehension. Despite the successes, several challenges were encountered during the instructional process. One significant issue was classroom management, particularly in maintaining engagement among students of varying levels. While advanced learners often thrived in group discussions, some beginners struggled to keep up, which occasionally led to frustration and disengagement. This required the instructor to constantly monitor and adjust group dynamics to ensure that all students felt included and motivated. Additionally, balancing the pace of instruction proved challenging. At times, more

advanced students expressed impatience during activities designed for beginners, while some beginners felt overwhelmed during mixed-level discussions. Finding the right balance between providing enough challenge for advanced learners and adequate support for beginners necessitated ongoing adjustments to lesson plans.

Qualitative feedback from students highlighted overall satisfaction with the learning experience. Many students expressed appreciation for the supportive classroom environment, emphasizing how pair work and group activities allowed them to learn from one another. Beginners reported feeling less intimidated when interacting with advanced peers, noting that these interactions provided valuable opportunities for practice. Surveys conducted at the end of the term revealed that a significant majority of students felt they had improved their listening and speaking skills. Advanced learners mentioned that the opportunity to teach and support their peers reinforced their own learning, while beginners acknowledged feeling more confident in their abilities to engage in conversation. Overall, the feedback indicated a positive perception of the strategies employed, underscoring their effectiveness in fostering skill development among mixed-level learners.

Discussion. The results of this study support the existing literature on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in mixed-level language classrooms. Research has shown that employing diverse teaching strategies, such as pairing students of different proficiency levels, facilitates peer learning and fosters an inclusive environment. According to Johnson and Lee, such practices not only benefit advanced learners by reinforcing their knowledge but also provide essential support for beginners, promoting overall language development [2; 69p]. The significant improvements in listening comprehension and speaking fluency among beginner learners in this study corroborate findings by Thompson, who found that exposure to authentic materials—like podcasts and videos—can greatly enhance learners' comprehension skills and prepare them for real-world communication [4;45-59p]. By integrating these resources, this study effectively enriched the learners' experiences, enabling them to engage with varied linguistic input that contributed to their skill development. However, challenges regarding classroom management and engagement were notable. This aligns with the observations made by Garcia, who argued that maintaining a balance in mixed-level classrooms often requires ongoing adjustments to teaching methods to address the varying needs of students [1;78-89p]. As noted in this study, the instructor had to continuously assess the dynamics of the classroom to ensure that all learners were adequately challenged without feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, qualitative feedback from students highlighted the importance of a supportive learning environment in enhancing motivation and engagement. According to Smith, a positive classroom atmosphere, where students feel comfortable taking risks and collaborating, is critical for fostering language acquisition in mixed-level settings [3;155-170p]. The participants in this study expressed that the collaborative activities not only improved their language skills but also built a sense of community within the classroom. In summary, the findings of this study contribute to the growing body of evidence advocating for the use of differentiated instruction and authentic materials in mixed-level classrooms. By addressing the specific challenges faced by diverse learners and cultivating a collaborative environment, educators can significantly enhance listening and speaking skills across varying proficiency levels. Further research is necessary to refine these instructional practices and develop effective strategies tailored for mixed-level learners.

Conclusion. This study has demonstrated the effectiveness of differentiated instruction and the use of authentic materials in enhancing listening and speaking skills among mixed-level learners. The findings indicate that employing varied teaching strategies—such as peer pairing, differentiated tasks, and real-life conversation simulations—can significantly support both

advanced and beginner learners in achieving their language acquisition goals. By fostering a collaborative classroom environment, students reported increased confidence and engagement, which are essential for successful language learning. Despite the challenges faced, particularly in maintaining classroom management and ensuring equal engagement across proficiency levels, the positive outcomes highlight the importance of adaptive teaching practices. These practices not only address the diverse needs of students but also promote a sense of community and shared learning experiences. In light of the findings, it is crucial for educators to continue refining their instructional approaches to better cater to mixed-level classrooms. Future research should explore additional strategies and technologies that can further enhance language learning in diverse settings. By doing so, educators can better prepare students for real-world communication challenges, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their starting point, can progress effectively in their language skills.

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