

Multi-Level World Language Classes: Teacher Perspectives and Practical Solutions

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Abstract

Multi-level classes, classrooms that incorporate multiple levels of learners simultaneously, have existed for decades, yet have received little scholarly attention with respect to world language programs. This article presents a review of relevant literature on the topic and reports an analysis of the data from a national survey of U.S. K-16 world language teachers who currently teach or have taught multiple levels or multiple languages in the same class period (n=124). The findings of this exploratory study confirm the long-standing existence of multi-level classes in the U.S. educational landscape and offer suggestions to support teachers confronted with this challenge and ideas for future research.

Keywords: *Multi-level Classes, World Languages*

Background

The impetus for the present research stems from the authors' personal experience with teachers who found themselves splitting time and energy between two or more different student populations. Additionally, hearing countless stories of World Language (WL) teachers' efforts to manage multiple grade books to collect and maintain data from multi-level courses contributed to the need to investigate this ongoing challenge in which the teachers are charged with making the best of a difficult situation (Hunter & Barr-Harrison, 1979). This situation restricts teachers' ability to focus on research-driven and proven practices such as proficiency-based instruction, High Leverage Teaching Practices (HLTPs) and interpersonal communication (as developed by Glisan & Donato, 2017, 2021).

Multi-level world language (WL) courses are not a new phenomenon in the U.S. and have proliferated over the past few decades due to declining WL enrollments in public schools (AMACAD, 2017, Stein-Smith, 2021), diminished school budgets for non-STEM subjects, and competition with AP and advanced level content area classes scheduled at the same time as WL classes (Wells, 2019). Despite being a long-standing issue in WL Education, there appears to be no recent empirical research

that has been conducted regarding how to address the issue both administratively and in the daily classroom. Furthermore, multi-level instruction is not generally addressed in teacher training (Ashton, 2018; Hunter & Barr-Harrison, 1979). In fact, to date, “there is a lack of research into effective pedagogy in the foreign language multilevel classroom” (Ashton, 2018, p. 106).

Indeed, this is a current conundrum for WL teachers who are literally forced to choose between concurrently offering multi-level, single-period classroom languages classes or not offering a particular language class at all. At present, there truly is no viable answer to alleviate this issue, and thus, the rationale for the authors to survey WL teachers who are in this untenable situation. There may be some who feel that combining separate single-level language classes into a larger class could free up a WL teacher to offer a smaller-sized upper-level WL class in a single period is the answer to this problem, yet, these scenarios have their own inherent challenges (Chavez, 2006; Harfitt, 2012). Given these factors, the researchers developed a survey to elicit qualitative data to discover how prevalent this phenomenon is, how the challenge can be alleviated, and what are some strategies used by current instructors to move beyond just “making the best of the situation.”

Literature Review

As previously noted, there exists a paucity of published research on the multi-level classroom (Campbell, 1993; Hunter & Barr-Harrison, 1979). Furthermore, much of the tangentially related research dates back decades (Hunter & Barr-Harrison, 1979; Levy, 1982; Robinson, 1990; Strasheim, 1979), or was conducted in a non-U.S. context (Ashton, 2018, 2019; Passmore, 2019). Thus, in order to explore this phenomenon within the present U.S. educational context, it is first necessary to establish a definition of a multi-level classroom.

Operationalizing a Definition of a Multi-Level Classroom

In the published literature, there is no singular, operationalized definition of a multi-level class. The term is used to refer to multi-level, multi-grade, and mixed classes. Strasheim (1979) defines multi-level as “the teaching of two or more levels of foreign [world] language in a single class period” (p. 423). More recently, Carr (2005) expanded this definition to include students at diverse levels of proficiency, background, and experience, while Ashton (2019) adds that it evolved as a means of dealing with declining enrollment numbers. While these perspectives were generated in an international context, anecdotal conversation provides clear connections to the U.S. educational context, including situations where different world languages are taught in the same classroom. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the above definition does not refer to the differentiated instruction that occurs naturally in any classroom due to learning differences among learners. For the purpose of this research investigation, the multi-level classroom is defined as a WL classroom in which learners of varying proficiency levels, curricular levels, and/or language studied are combined into a single class period.

Why do Multi-Level Courses Continue to Exist?

Contrary to what many may believe, school administrators do not necessarily schedule multi-level classes carelessly, casually, or arbitrarily. Historically, multi-level courses have been offered for a number of reasons. In many cases, multi-level classes provide an opportunity to offer courses that do not meet a minimum number of students, or the multi-level class is offered in place of paying a teacher for an overload, or in the absence of additional staff. It may also be driven by the budget of the school which demands using a teacher's services in another subject content area in addition to a WL class and giving the WL teacher the option of teaching a multi-level class versus not teaching a particular language/level at all. In many cases, offering multi-level WL classes can be seen as a victory: Allowing a WL or an advanced level of a WL to be taught rather than be eliminated completely from the curriculum. WL teachers may volunteer to offer multi-level classes in an effort to preserve a more extended sequence and to provide students with opportunities to continue to study and develop proficiency. Additionally, multi-level WL offerings are a way in which a school can continue offering a language in response to enrollment attrition or when there is a very small minority of the total student population interested (Ashton, 2018; Commins, 1996; Strasheim, 1979) in studying a language (i.e., Latin, Russian). Often, these multi-level classes are the result of needing to make the best of a bad situation" (Hunter & Barr-Harrison, 1979, p. 426).

Passmore (2019) notes that the issues from the 1970s and 1980s still exist today and adds that often, multi-level classes become a necessity to address the challenge of low WL enrollments. While more prevalent in international literature, anecdotal evidence suggests that this challenge thrives in U.S. public schools, in particular under the current educational context.

Despite the scarcity and outdated nature of research studies examining the issue of multi-level WL instruction in the same classroom, a thorough review of the extant literature does reveal common themes, including the continued existence of multi-level classes, challenges, and potential strategies for managing this situation.

Quality teaching of more than one level of language in a single class period can certainly present challenges, as documented by Strauber (1985) and later by Campbell (1993) in his review of empirical research studies examining the efficacy of multi-level French and English-French bilingual language instruction in Ontario, Canada (Carleton Board of Education, 1990; Daniel, 1988; LaLonde et al., 1980; Reed, 1991). The environment created by combining multiple levels of instruction in the same classroom at the same time sets up a very difficult dichotomy to manage, which goes well beyond the extremes of classroom differentiation. In today's K-12 teaching environment, where teachers are already overworked and overwhelmed by the demands placed on them, the multi-level classroom increases those already inherently heavy preparation pressures (Bell, 2004).

In a more recent study conducted in the WL classroom, Passmore (2019) reported the results of a study of multi-level classes by New Zealand French teachers. She offers several explanations for why multi-level classrooms are a challenge. First is that traditional pedagogy may not accommodate the needs of multiple levels of learners. Teachers are accustomed to leading and controlling their single-language-

level classrooms which have a different dynamic than multi-level classrooms. A multi-level classroom, by its nature, commonly places the onus on the learner, with an expectation of self-direction and motivation. Yet, when the learner is not a self-directed, focused student, the efficacy of being in a multi-level classroom may not provide the strongest learning environment for all students.

Additionally, Passmore (2019) reports that teachers tend to view the different language levels as separate classes, which they feel requires unique lesson plans for each level. Maintaining the focus and energy for what amounts to two simultaneous classes is draining for the teacher and tends to be ineffective (Levy, 1982; Strasheim, 1979). Teaching each group or level separately can also make students feel disjointed, unsettled, and possibly rushed (to get the work done in a finite period of classroom time). As a result, students in a multi-level classroom may experience a lack of classroom unity and consequently may feel disenfranchised without having the discourse community of a traditional one-level language classroom (Passmore, 2019). Ashton (2018) adds that in the multi-level classroom, “the diversity of the population of learners pose[s] a significant challenge to their teachers...[and]...is more complex as teachers also need to adequately prepare students for the curriculum and assessment requirements at each year level” (p. 105).

Although there is a dearth of empirical research on this issue published during much of the last four decades, current research on WL Education speaks to proficiency-based instruction, high-leverage teaching practices (Glisan & Donato, 2017, 2021), and cultural competence, all of which may be further impacted by the demands of the environment created by multi-level classes. Multi-level classes divide the teachers’ attention and make it difficult to create the classroom community that is supported by this research. As one example, High Leverage Teaching Practice number #1 (Facilitating Target Language Comprehensibility) is made significantly more challenging if the learners in the class are at two different proficiency levels and are focused on completing different tasks. It puts the responsibility on teachers to develop methods that support the research on input when they are forced to multi-task between two different groups of learners. All good classroom teachers differentiate instruction to support student learning. However, multi-level classes provide a challenge beyond differentiation in that the teacher must at times disregard the needs of one group of students in favor of another group, and rely on student self-motivation for success.

Lack of Support and/or Training

Ashton (2019) and Passmore (2019) both noted a lack of professional development for teachers of multilevel language classes. In fact, 85% of the teachers who responded to Ashton’s (2019) survey indicated that they had never received any specific professional development (PD) for teaching multilevel classes. The teachers in Ashton’s (2017) study also expressed a need for more help with curricular planning and the opportunities to explore new techniques in order to be more successful in the multi-level classroom, contributing to the impetus for this current study.

Given the gap between research completed decades ago and the more recent studies having been conducted in non-U.S. contexts, the topic of multi-level classroom support plays an important role in the current, budget-conscious context of WL

teaching. Previous research provides limited insight into instructor perceptions of multi-level classes, nor does the research identify both challenges and benefits to either teachers or students. Furthermore, research lacks a source of strategies that instructors can use to create a successful learning experience in a multi-level class.

Research Questions

To explore this issue, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do WL instructors feel about teaching multi-level WL classes?
2. What are the challenges of teaching multi-level WL classes?
3. What are some strategies that instructors use to create successful learning environments in multi-level WL courses?

Methods

Survey Instrument and Procedures

Following a thorough search of published literature on multi-level WL classes, the next step was to develop the survey instrument. The authors conducted a small group roundtable at an ACTFL conference, in which a preliminary literature review was presented along with a first draft of the survey. Feedback from participants at the roundtable session helped inform the development of the final survey (Appendix A).

The Qualtrics survey instrument consisted of 25 questions answerable in a Likert-like scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended formats. Following IRB approval, the online survey link and an explanation of the current study were posted on multiple discussion boards of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Special Interest Groups, on the FL Teach listserv, and sent via email requests to the presidents of the state WL Associations.

This project used a mixed-methods approach; data were both quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. Simple descriptive statistics were calculated for the quantitative responses identifying participant demographics to establish the broad demographic base of respondents while a thematic analysis identified recurrent themes for each set of open-ended answers to allow the teacher perspectives and potential solutions to surface.

Participants

As intended, the survey reached a broad spectrum of the nationally-targeted population which consisted of 124 respondents. The tables below show this population in terms of WL levels taught (Table 1), languages taught (Table 2), years of experience (Table 3), and professional memberships (Table 4). In sum, at the K12 level, there were 111 (90%) high school teachers, 23 (19%) middle school teachers, and six (5%) elementary teachers. Additionally, sixteen respondents (3.2%) taught at a 2-year community college, 4-year university (9%), or another educational venue (1%).

Table 1***Levels of Instruction***

Levels of WLS Taught*	% (N=124)	n
High School (9-12)	89.5	111
Middle School (6-8)	18.5	23
4-year University	8.9	11
2-year Community College	3.2	4
Elementary PreK-5	4.8	6
OTHER	.8	1

*n=124, yet some respondents taught multiple levels

Table 2***Languages Taught by Participants***

World Languages Taught	%	n
Spanish	48.4	60
French	26.6	33
German	5.6	7
Chinese	.8	1
Japanese	.8	1
ESL/TESOL	.8	1
OTHER	16.9	21
Total Respondents:		124

Table 3***Teaching Experience of Participants***

Years of Teaching Experience	%	n
1-2	3	4
3-5	5	6
6-10	17	21
11-15	13	16
16-20	19	23
>20	42	52
Retired	2	2

In sum, the majority of our respondents are experienced educators, with 52 subjects (42%) self-identified as having more than 20 years of teaching experience in the WL classroom. Additionally, Table 4 shows that our participants are active within the WL profession.

Table 4***Professional Membership of Participants***

World Language Association	%	n
State WL association	31.76	81
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)	26.67	68
Regional WL association	6.67	17
American Association of Teachers of French (AATF)	10.59	27
American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP)	10.59	27
American Association of Teachers of German (AATG)	3.14	8
American Classical League (ACL)	2.75	7
OTHER	7.84	20

Additionally, of the 124 survey respondents, approximately half (50.8%, n = 63) belong to a small cohort of language teachers in their schools, universities, or school districts, whereas others were the only WL teacher in similar groups (18.55%, n = 23) or part of a large cohort of WL teachers (30.65%, n = 38).

Additionally, the respondents were equally divided between urban (26.6%, n = 33), rural, (35.5%, n =39), and a mix of urban and rural (34.6%, n =38) teaching venues, with an additional 8.9% (n=11) indicating they work in a suburban district and an additional 2.4% (n=3) indicating a unique situation such as a private school, small town, or other classification. In sum, these demographics provide a profile of our respondents that shows a wide variety of backgrounds, teaching experiences, and teaching contexts.

Qualitative Data Analysis

To further explore the role of multi-level classes in today's U.S. educational context, the authors sought to understand how teachers perceived their multi-level classes. Using grounded theory, the researchers discovered common themes from the qualitative data collected via the open-ended responses. As noted above, the survey offered broad, open-ended questions to allow respondents to provide their perspectives; many respondents shared both positive and negative opinions, often within the same response. Several themes emerged from the responses: positive aspects and benefits of multi-level language classes, including pedagogical benefits, and challenges and drawbacks of multi-level classes (for both teachers and students), including a lack of administrative understanding and support, and a need for increased professional development and training.

Findings***Positive Aspects and Benefits of Multi-Level Language Classes***

Despite the anecdotal impressions that formed the impetus for this research, many teachers found teaching multiple levels of the same WL to be a positive experience for a variety of reasons. One WL teacher reported that it makes students develop a feeling of family or being part of a community. "When they know that everyone develops at different speeds and with different skill sets, they feel confident about learning to communicate" (Spanish/Russian teacher, 20+ years of teaching). This same teacher commented:

...students have models who can operate at a higher level... Lower-level students are inspired to achieve more. Gentle competitions can mean that the lower-level students work harder, because if they can win over a native speaker on any language task, they feel very confident. Native speakers often have home resources that can come into the classroom, ...bring credibility to the classroom, and they feel valued for what they can contribute. (Spanish/Russian teacher, 20+ years of experience)

Similarly, this sentiment was echoed by younger teachers who commented that “it is good for them to be able to review previous knowledge” (French teacher, 6-10 years of teaching) and “I love it for the AP level because we all learn from one another, including myself as I sometimes have native speakers in the course and we focus a lot on culture and current events” (Spanish teacher, 6-10 years teaching). A more experienced respondent commented:

... [Combining]two-year alternating curriculum classes [will] also build your enrollment...some of the kids in the lower level emerge as stronger, more proficient students than some of the upper-level kids. (Spanish/French/Latin/ESL teacher retired, 36 years teaching)

Expanding this description of the positive benefits of a multi-level classroom, with multiple language levels in the same classroom, “higher-level students can motivate lower-level students, [and] lower-level students are exposed to higher-level language and may acquire [it] faster” (Spanish, 20+ years teaching). In fact, “many of the lower-level students see the situation as an opportunity to ‘step-up,’ ‘excel’ and enjoy that.” Of particular benefit to the lower-level student is that if they can communicate with an upper-level student, and perhaps even a native speaker on any language task, they may feel very confident. When exposed to upper-level instruction, lower-level students may have “their interest...piqued by ...what [an upper-level or] AP class is doing. They often like to ‘eavesdrop’ and try to understand the... [language] being spoken” (Spanish teacher, 6-10 years teaching).

Furthermore, one teacher noted that “older [upper level] students can get review on older concepts, and younger students can get a preview of new concepts” (Japanese, 11-15 years teaching). Along the same vein, another teacher added that, “the upper-level students become stronger in their skills because of the careful attention...[the teacher is] paying to making everything comprehensible for everyone” (Spanish, 3-5 years teaching).

In sum, language teachers identified a certain benefit of students learning from each other and expanded opportunities to connect students and build a larger classroom community. Despite these possibilities however, respondents were quick to identify drawbacks and challenges to having multiple class levels combined into a single class period.

Challenges and Drawbacks of Multi-Level Classes

Challenges for Teachers

When asked to expand on the challenges they faced in teaching multi-level courses, many survey respondents found teaching multi-level classes presents similar

challenges to those previously identified by Ashton (2018, 2019) and Passmore (2019). Among the challenges, respondents identified issues of time, balancing the varied student levels and classroom management due to student maturity.

The first challenge concerned issues related to time. Teachers reported having insufficient time to plan, prepare materials, give feedback, and work individually with students and give them “the individual time and instruction that they deserve, and in some cases, really need” (French, 1-2 years teaching). Additionally, multi-level language teachers reported not being able “to fully support each level,” (ASL, 3-5 years teaching) find appropriate resources and “plan effectively, making sure the proficiency levels are clearly differentiated within the same theme” (ASL, 3-5 years teaching).

Relatedly, a second challenge voiced by the teachers, confirms Passmore’s view (2019) concerning the attempt to balance keeping students on task while providing support for student-centered learning. One respondent summed up this idea:

It’s a very hard balance to walk, teaching 2 classes at the same time. Students end up with less instruction time overall. It’s hard for the teacher to do 2 things at once, because students end up asking questions as they encounter them anyway or they get stuck and their group can’t figure something out. (Latin, 3-5 years teaching)

Other respondents identified issues related to curriculum and the challenges of meeting the needs of two or more different student populations during the same class period, and “keeping everyone moving forward and covering all the information that both levels need to cover that year” (Italian teacher, 11-15 years teaching).

In addition to the difficulties that arise when addressing student populations that may lack the maturity level and focus that is necessary for student-centered learning, there were WL teachers who found it difficult at to keep students on task and advanced students focused. This can be particularly difficult when: “native speakers can get bored, and beginners can feel frustrated if either end of the language ability group has too much focus.” Teachers found it “frustrating to have to continually clarify for students at the lower level, or to keep slowing down the pace of the higher level...[and]...always have the right reading levels available for the whole class.” One of the biggest frustrations for one teacher was “keeping everyone on track” and deal with the realization that students were “...not able to do some of the larger group activities with the smaller numbers in a single-level group within the multi-level class...[because] they would be a distraction to the others.” Likewise, another teacher expressed a non-language-related issue, “discipline problems can be worse if the kids are given too much freedom” especially when “immature students [are] unable to work independently” (Spanish/Russian teacher, 20+ years of experience).

Challenges for Students

Intertwined with the challenges faced by teachers in the multi-level classroom, students in their multi-level WL classrooms also experienced multiple challenges in this environment including motivational, organizational, and maturity issues. From the teacher’s perspective, respondents observed that “upper-level kids are usually very motivated and have reasons to learn the language...[while] many lower-level kids just want the credit to graduate or get into college” (French teacher, 16-20 years teaching).

To be successful in a multi-level classroom environment, students must learn to work independently while the teacher worked with the upper-level students, be self-regulated to stay on task, and “spend much more time in self-paced learning than they would if classes were split.” (ASL teacher, 6-10 years teaching.) Thus, “they have to be self-starters and take the initiative in their learning” (Russian teacher, 20+ years of teaching).

Furthermore, there were “students who do not want to be there [may] cause behavioral disruptions,” (Spanish teacher, 11-15 years teaching). It is possible this is due in part to being “frustrated that they don’t get much individualized time with... [the teacher] because there are so many people in the class” (Spanish, 16-20 years teaching). Another challenge to students in the multi-level classroom was having to deal with the “noise level in a small space” (Spanish, 6-10 years teaching) and staying focused when the teacher is working with the other language level. As one teacher reported, “students today get bored and revert to the phones whenever they are not actively involved with the teacher” (Latin teacher, 20+ years teaching).

Lack of Administrative Support

This study’s participants expressed similar concerns as those noted in Ashton’s (2018) and Passmore’s (2019) research that found that administrators do not necessarily seem to understand the realities of the multi-level classroom. One teacher, in particular (who taught Russian for over 20 years) reported, “I don’t [know] whose bright idea it was to place all six levels in one class at my school, but they have done their best to diminish the quality and experience of the program” Another responded added that the “administration would never combine Algebra 1 and calculus yet think nothing of combining level 1 and AP of a language.” (Latin, 16-20 years teaching. Another teacher echoed this idea:

Multi-level classes would be O.K. if the administration and scheduling folk would realize that teaching a multi-level class is like teaching two separate subjects to separate groups/classes in the same periods. It’s all about expectations. If I didn’t feel so pressured to deliver the curriculum content to the students then I would not be so stressed.
(French/German teacher, 16-20 years teaching)

With regards to the level of support they receive from their administration, some respondents (51%, n=63) reported that their institutions or school district were somewhat supportive of them (i.e., training, funding, curricular freedom, resources), while others (42%, n = 52) felt very supported. One participant summed up this varied level of support by commenting: “We are provided with a variety of teacher-generated resources. Our administration will provide us with support, but there are always limits” (Spanish, 6-10 years teaching). Another teacher echoed this idea:

Most of the administration supports me as the expert in my field. I’ve had one big issue with a nonsupportive [sic] assistant principal but the principal supports my method as well and thinks it is innovative. Parents and students need explanations and assurance but ultimately,

they like it too. Some other staff still criticise [sic] but they always will.
(Spanish teacher, 6-10 years teaching)

In addition to inconsistent administrative support, participants noted that the value of multi-level classes had evolved over time.

Changing Value Over Time

As noted above, when asked how they feel about having multi-level classes, teachers had mixed reactions. Many reported teaching multi-level classes as being problematic and reported it as having more value in the past than it did at the time that they completed the survey. Two respondents observed, “I do not support it. I do not think that there is educational value behind it as it merely is a strategy to consolidate classes and open up teachers’ schedules. (Spanish, 20+ years teaching)” and “I do not like it- [it is] hard on students and teacher alike [having] usually large classes” (French, 20+ years teaching). Some teachers found teaching multiple WL levels something that they used successfully at one time, but with increasing class sizes and program cuts, found it a lot less beneficial across languages:

I used to like them [multi-level classes] because it was the only way I could offer 4. As class sizes grew, I started to not like them because it became harder to make sure all were on task and I couldn’t give them undivided attention. (Spanish, 6-10 years teaching)

I didn’t mind it when there were two FT people in my language, but now that they have cut the other position and I also have to [do] everything, I’m starting to feel exploited. (French teacher, more than 20 years teaching)

I had a thriving Russian program of about 55 students, across two class periods in 2015-2016. Somehow leadership did not allow students to enroll in Russian in Spring 2016. This cut my program in half. Now we are 36 in one class period and at six levels. Meanwhile, today’s students see the necessity of studying more than Spanish and French and feel that the school system is not preparing them for the global economy. (Russian teacher, 20+ years teaching)

Not surprisingly, many teachers considered multi-level classes to be a necessary evil or a means to an end. Available published literature noted the value of multi-level classes as a means to an end: Being able to offer upper-level classes (Ashton, 2018; Ward & East, 2016). These sentiments are echoed by several teachers, describing it as “... something I have to do in order to gain/not loose [sic] in student numbers. I feel the drawbacks are more powerful than the benefits” (French teacher, 16-20 years teaching). Another teacher from a rural area stated, “In a rural school with few teachers, it is a way to allow more students to take classes at times that fit in their schedule (Spanish teacher, 20+ years teaching). A teacher striving to support offering AP classes wrote, “Because it is the only way that I can offer AP Literature, I’ve accepted it as a necessary part of my workload. I would rather have it this way than not be able to offer my students AP” (Spanish teacher, 16-20 years teaching).

Speaking to the teacher shortage, another teacher wrote:

...this is the current reality in my district. I feel as though [if] I do not do this, my program would be in danger because there would not be enough opportunity provided for students to advance to the upper levels due to staffing. (French teacher, 11-15 years teaching)

Another teacher spoke to need for multileveled courses with fluctuating enrollment, For many of us it is a way to keep our language programs going, giving us the opportunity to continue when maybe one year, level 1 numbers are low, to keep that class going instead of cancelling it, and giving the impression that that language is being phased out. (French teacher, 16-20 years teaching)

However, despite the possible benefits of using multi-level class scheduling to address enrollment issues, respondents expressed concerns that the challenges and labor of multi-level classes may overshadow any possible benefits, such as “I wish I could have a more balanced class to reach them with plenty of time to reach their full potential” (Spanish, more than 20 years). A seasoned instructor who has taught Spanish in high school and two years at a university wrote:

I realize that as I have time to develop a curriculum, this will get better. But I am lobbying for my school to split the levels so that I have better class sizes and can sequence my instruction better. (Spanish 16-20 years at multiple levels)

In sum, many teachers recognize that multi-level classes may be a necessary part of our educational landscape, and in some ways beneficial. However, respondents were quick to acknowledge the ongoing lack of support and training to make the most of these classes.

Need for Professional Development/Training and Support

In previous literature, Ashton (2019) and Passmore (2019) noted a lack of training and support as a significant factor in the issue of multi-level classes. In order to respond to the challenges presented by multi-level courses, many respondents expressed a desire for training and support for conducting these classes. According to 94.4% (n = 117) of the respondents, they did not receive any type of training on teaching multi-level languages in their teacher education programs. Additionally, one of the reasons multi-level classes are problematic is that teachers do not generally receive training or professional development in how to harness the potential of multi-level classes, nor in how to manage such classes. Among the scarce responses that indicated they had received some professional development (.05%, n=6) the activities were described by two respondents as “Other teachers spoke about what they have done that works and does not work for them.” (Italian, 11-15 years teaching)” or “I have attended some presentations at KSWLA to receive ideas about how to reach each level within the class period.” (Spanish, 11-15 years teaching). In the absence of that professional development, one respondent took on the responsibility to fill that void: “...on my own I figured that a two-year alternating combined class curriculum was the best way to go for both my students and me. I share this with my pre-service teacher candidates. I also share how to do this with others on WL Facebook blogs and the ACTFL discussion group.” Interestingly, despite this limited opportunity, 76% (n=71 of 94 respondents) of the survey respondents reported they felt somewhat

confident or very confident in their ability to manage a multi-level course.

The thematic responses of the survey respondents re-affirm that the challenge of multi-level classes is alive and well in the present-day K-12 system. The wide variety of teacher backgrounds and demographics show that this challenge remains widespread and has gone unanswered by professional development. The results of this research study provide some significant detail and depth of understanding that has been primarily absent from the published literature, dating back several decades. The question then is where to proceed from here so that the same cannot be said in another decade.

Discussion

Returning now to the three research questions that guided this study:

1. How do instructors feel about teaching multi-level WL classes?

As seen in the responses noted above, survey respondents offered a variety of perspectives about teaching in the multi-level classroom, both positive and negative. Teachers expressed how multi-level classes have the potential to be effective but have changed in nature over time and in some cases have remained or become something to “make the best of a situation” as noted in the research conducted decades ago. A lack of administrative support and the ongoing need for professional development and training in teacher preparation programs were high on the list of challenges expressed by respondents.

2. What are the challenges in teaching multi-level WL classes?

Equally, the respondents identified numerous challenges faced in teaching in multi-level classes, including a lack of time for the additional planning needed for a multi-level class. It is important to reiterate here that challenges faced in the multi-level classroom cannot be overcome by simply differentiating instruction – something that occurs in any good language classroom given the nature of proficiency development. Teaching in a multi-level environment (or a multi-language environment) requires a conscious decision making, careful planning and working with the students to become motivated, self-directed learners. While all language teachers must advocate for their language programs, teachers in multi-level classrooms need to work with administration for a common understanding of the limitations of such classes and potential internal solutions.

3. What are some strategies that instructors use to create successful learning environments in multi-level WL courses?

Finally, we asked our participants to offer suggestions and strategies that they have found beneficial in managing multi-level classes. Levy (1979) and Strasheim (1979) suggested possible strategies that teachers may find effective, indicating that multi-level classes may require a teacher to find opportunities to go beyond the pages of the text in order to meet the needs of their students. These strategies remain applicable

in today's educational context, and include a split period approach, rotating course approach or special interest course, as well as the use of student aids and supportive staffing, independent study, and individualized instruction. Our respondents offered additional suggestions that mirrored the research-based strategies presented in previous published research, as well as offering a number of expanded suggestions for successful learning experiences in multi-level classrooms:

- Proficiency-driven methods, comprehension-based methods, and a communication focus, rather than a grammar driven curriculum, including TPR and TPR Storytelling.
- Split the curriculum: combine years 4 and 5, alternate curricular years (A/B), 2-year curriculum for levels 4 and 5 so that no student has the same units of study for two years or alternate thematically.
- Project-based learning (e.g., a project about human rights with student presentations on the human rights issues faced in a specific country.)
- Service learning (level 4 students taught a class at the elementary school once a week. They created lesson plans and materials and did a reflection for each lesson they taught).
- Use higher level students as resources, peer support or a peer tutor model. Pair heritage speakers or upper-level students with lower-level students.
- Stations or mini-group structure within the classroom.

In previous literature, Levy (1982) and Galloway (1983) also suggested that increasing administrative support and training and teacher networking, combined with the use of teacher aides and volunteers, can support the multi-level classroom. This too remains valid for today's teacher. Decades later, the findings noted above of the continued limited offerings of professional development and teacher preparation programs reaffirms that effective language teaching in multi-level classes remain an issue to be addressed.

Furthermore, Macaro (2000), as cited in Passmore (2019) and Ellis (2003), believed that a teacher-led environment does not enable spontaneous learner-talk, because the teacher is controlling the conversation. It remains essential to develop a proficiency focus in any WL classroom, which can be hindered by the challenging environment of a multi-level classroom. In response to this problem, Glisan and Donato (2017) proposed six essential abilities (HLTP, high leverage teaching practices) that guide teacher's decision making and practices in an effective language classroom.

- HLTP #1: Facilitating Target Language Comprehensibility
- HLTP #2: Building a Classroom Discourse Community
- HLTP #3: Guiding Learners to Interpret and Discuss Authentic Texts
- HLTP #4: Focusing on Form in a Dialogic Context Through PACE
- HLTP #5: Focusing on Cultural Products, Practices, and Perspectives in a Dialogic Context
- HLTP #6: Providing Oral Corrective Feedback to Improve Learner Performance.

HLTPs support decision-making in the classroom, rather than imitation of a prescribed teaching method (Glisan & Donato (2017). However, placing multiple levels in a single class period makes it challenging to enact these research-supported

practices, for example, the use of the target language in a classroom discourse community, using a PACE lesson to focus on grammar in context, and providing oral corrective feedback. As the WL community strives to continue to work towards proficiency-focused instruction, the existence of too many multi-level classes could prove detrimental to seeing students reach higher levels of proficiency.

Regardless, in both previously published research and as observed by our participants, there are cases when multi-level classes may remain a necessary evil. Several potential strategies for managing the multi-level classroom were noted by Passmore (2019). She suggests that the teacher's role must vary greatly in the multi-level classroom, stepping away from traditional teacher-fronted strategies. Direct instruction may still play a role, but the teacher should strive for active learning, rather than passively receiving information from the teacher, should be the primary focus in any WL classroom. Consequently, appropriate pedagogy for this environment should include opportunities for students to actively construct meaning and apply what they have learned. Beneficial classroom activities may include opportunities for researching information, asking questions, solving problems, and thinking critically about their topic (Blumberg, 2009; Taole, 2017; Weimer, 2013; as cited in Passmore, 2019). In sum, the key to success in a multi-level class is shifting the role of learner from receiving direct instruction from their teacher to a learner's self-driven structure.

The results of the present research survey support the strategies listed above and build on these ideas by offering a number of useful strategies that could be used to manage multi-level classes. These results are discussed in the previous section. Despite the limited research and lack of training and professional development, the responses of survey respondents from their first-hand experience have provided a rich collection of potential strategies. One of the most salient results of this research is the practical aspect of supporting the teachers who continue to be faced with these challenges. Given that the challenges facing language education programs and addressing the needs of today's students will likely be present for a while, the strategies presented here could be useful planning and implementing instruction in a multi-level course.

Limitations and Future Directions

All research naturally has inherent limitations, and this study is no exception. Due to the fact that there is no comprehensive database for WL educators in the U.S., the authors developed their own system of identifying potential respondents to the research study. Thus, a link to the online research survey was posted on selected ACTFL Discussion Boards, FL Teach, and distributed to language associations and long-term language educators, which may contribute to a certain homogeneity to the study's respondent population. The research focused on the responses of teachers who are actively engaged in the profession. Teachers who are not actively engaged with these organizations may offer additional perspectives on this issue.

Future research should expand the quantitative and qualitative investigation of student engagement and one-on-one interviews and classroom observations to document the realities of multi-level classrooms. In many areas of current WL research agendas, classroom observations and student performance remain largely

absent from research projects, possibly in part due to the challenges of conducting research in classrooms involving minors. Future research should include these measures to document what the multi-level classroom in the U.S. truly looks like, including explorations of student engagement and interaction.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study sought to investigate the depth and breadth of multi-level classes in the U.S. K-12 educational context, captured through the lens of the surveyed WL teachers who live this reality. The results of this study corroborate the fact that this phenomenon still exists throughout the U.S., and teachers remain largely unsupported in their efforts to manage these courses. A similar trend was reported by both Passmore (2019) and Ashton (2018, 2019) in New Zealand. The teachers' perceptions provided by this research provide a basis in support of their colleagues who may be tasked with offering multi-level WL classes or not having the opportunity to offer any WL classes.

While multi-level classes are not always an ideal situation, they do sometimes serve a key purpose in a WL curriculum. Multi-level classes have the potential to allow for an expanded curriculum (versus cancellation of programs or course levels) and an opportunity for higher-level students to interact with more novice learners. The present study also presents ways in which teachers reported on how they have managed and even leveraged multi-level classes. Multi-level classes, while not necessarily ideal, have the potential to provide a means to allow a WL program to offer higher-level courses, or maintain a program in the light of declining enrollments and budget cuts.

The strategies presented by the teachers in this survey also align with the needs of the Generation Z students who currently constitute the population in WL classrooms and who need more learner-centered educational foci. The role of the 21st-century teacher is not just to give students information for them to passively memorize and to repeat back. Rather, as the knowledge of effective language learning is increased, and fluctuations in proficiency levels continue, the strategies that have the potential to make multi-level classrooms a success will also inform and strengthen the traditional pedagogy of the classroom as compared with self-directed learning, a valuable skill for this generation of students.

While the present study did find ways in which multi-level classes can be harnessed to meet curricular needs for upper-level courses or under-enrolled languages, there remains a need to offer languages to all students at all levels in environments that promote the development of language proficiency and cultural competence – something that may be more challenging in a multi-level course.

Finally, the issue of multi-level classes and the need for teacher support is an area that ACTFL should consider, perhaps as part of its guiding principles or position statements. Additionally, given the observations about the lack of professional development and the inclusion of this contemporary topic in teacher preparation programs, both ACTFL and the state language associations could meet that need by offering professional development on the topic. ACTFL and the regional and state language organizations could meet that need by offering Professional development on multi-level classes. Furthermore, this is a topic that should be present in pre-

service methods courses.

In the current educational climate of reduced enrollments, budget cuts, and post-pandemic realities, multi-level classes are likely to remain part of the educational landscape, and teacher preparation training of and support for teachers addressing this phenomenon will continue to be essential. The present research supports the role of the teacher, student control, and learner-centeredness as keys to supporting teachers tasked with working in multi-level classes.

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Appendix

Multi-level Classes Preliminary Survey

1. What level do you teach? (Check all that apply)

- Elementary PreK-5
- Middle School (6-8)
- High School (9-12)
- 2-year Community College
- 4-year University
- Other _____

2. Which language(s) do you teach?

- French
- German
- Spanish
- Chinese
- Japanese
- ESL/TESOL
- Other _____

3. How many years experience do you have teaching this language?

- 1-2
- 3-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- More than 20 years
- Retired. Please enter years of language teaching experience

4. I am a member of the following organizations: (Check all that apply)

- A state World Language Association
- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL)
- A regional World Language Association (NECTFL, SCOLT, CSCTFL, SW COLT, PNCFL)

- American Association of Teachers of German (AATG)
- American Association of Teachers of French (AATF)
- American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP)
- American Classical League (ACL)
- OTHER _____

5. I am:

- The only language teacher in my school/university/district
- One of a small cohort of language teachers in my school/university/district
- Part of a large cohort of language teachers in my school/university/district
- N/A

6. I am: (Select all that apply)

- An elementary school teacher
- A middle school teacher
- A high school teacher
- A university tenure-track faculty member
- Non tenure track faculty member
- Retired
- Community member
- I am a student
- Other _____

7. My institution or district:

- Is primarily urban
- Is primarily rural
- Is a mix
- Other _____

8. My institution or district:

- Is not supportive of my work
- Is somewhat supportive of my work
- Is very supportive of my work

9. How many years have you been teaching multi-level language classes?

- 1-2
- 3-5
- 6-10

___ 11-15

___ 16-20

___ More than 20 years

___ Retired - years teaching _____

10. Which levels do you teach together in a single class period/block/class?

11. Did your teacher preparation program include training on multi-level classes?

12. Have you received training for teaching multi-level courses from your school district/institution or professional organization?

Yes - Please describe your experience _____

No

13. Why do mixed-level classes exist in your program?

14. What strategies do you use to teach multi-level classes? Please be specific and list as many as you use.

15. Which strategies do you think are the most successful for teaching mixed-level classes? Why?

16. Please describe how you plan for and structure a typical multi-level class (or several typical classes if necessary)?

17. What are the benefits of a multi-level classroom?

18. What are the drawbacks of a multi-level classroom?

19. How do you feel about teaching multi-level classes? Why do you feel as you do? This is your opportunity to mention anything else you would like to say about teaching multi-level classes.

20. How confident do you feel teaching multi-level courses?

____ Not at all confident

____ Not very confident

____ Somewhat confident

____ Very confident

21. How does your school/district/institution support you?

22. What are the main challenges you face in teaching multi-level classes?

23. What do you view as the main benefits for students in multi-level classes?

24. What do you view as the main challenges for students in multi-level classes?

25. Please feel free to enter any additional comments on multi-level classes: