When describing language classes, we tend to refer to a group as either monolingual (all from the same language background) or multilingual (from a range of L1 backgrounds). Whichever context you are teaching in, there are a range of issues that teachers need to deal with, or exploit.

Typically, monolingual classes are more common in non-English speaking countries, where you have groups of local residents with the same L1 who all want to learn English. In this context there’s the obvious disadvantage that if these students want to communicate authentically with each other they are more likely to use their L1. It’s both unnecessary and unnatural for them to speak to each other in English. The teacher therefore has to foster a kind of artificial environment in which it is normal to use English to speak to someone who shares the same L1 as you. The students also need to buy into this pretence to some extent, which is easier with some groups than with others.

However, having a monolingual group isn’t just about an uphill battle to get students to speak English and stop lapsing into L1; it has a number of advantages as well. A common L1 means students are likely to share similar problems in learning English, and a handy book by Michael Swan and Bernard Smith (2001) helps teachers to anticipate and focus overtly on L1 transfer issues. They also share a common culture, so teachers can be pretty sure which topic areas will be familiar, unfamiliar, appropriate, offensive etc. Furthermore, a common L1 can be exploited for translation, contrastive analysis, giving instructions and checking understanding. I’m not saying that use of L1 in a foreign language classroom is always a good idea, but recent discussions have highlighted potential benefits. Teachers can maximize these benefits in the monolingual classroom by giving students opportunities to use L1 as or when appropriate.

Multilingual groups are more common in English-speaking countries, where students have either travelled in order to learn English, or are already living there and need to function more effectively in an English-speaking environment. One big advantage of this type of group is that English is the only common language among the students, and they are therefore obliged to use it in order to communicate. Cultural differences can be exploited as naturally occurring information gaps, allowing peer learning to take place on a sociocultural as well as a linguistic level. Having said that, multilingual groups can be problematic to teach. A range of L1s means there is a range of L1 transfer-related issues. Concentrated focus on the difference between /p/ and /b/ might be useful for your four Saudi students, for example, but it’s not a priority for the European and South American students in the same class. Teachers also need to think carefully about lesson content as they are dealing with a wider range of cultures and sensibilities. A lesson on pub culture may work really well with your Japanese and Spanish students but if the group contains students from Muslim backgrounds, you may think twice about using these materials.
When teaching a truly monolingual group, or a truly multilingual group, it is easy enough to understand the potential and the limitations that exist within each context. However, the two types of group are not completely polarised. What about those groups that are predominantly monolingual but also contain one or two speakers of other languages as well? The predomonolingual group, if you will. In my experience, this type of class is more common than you might expect, and can exist in both English-speaking and non-English speaking countries. In Romania I taught a class of 15 Romanians and an Iranian; in Hungary I had 11 Hungarians and a Libyan; in South Africa I frequently had classes dominated by Portuguese speakers with the occasional random other-language speaker; in Malaysia I frequently taught mostly Arabic speakers with the occasional Chinese or Korean student; in my current workplace we’ve had different dominant language groups over the years – it used to be Chinese, then Farsi, then Nepali, and at the moment it is Polish.

It seems to me that these predomonolingual classes bring with them the disadvantages of each class type but none of the advantages. The dominant language group in the classroom is likely to have more impact on lesson content and language selected by the teacher. So if you take the /p/ and /b/ example I gave earlier, if your class contains 15 Arabic-speaking students you may be very likely to do this, but what benefit does this have for the solitary Congolese student? Similarly, the dominant L1 group may influence the choice of topics covered. If a teacher tries to address this by focusing on language areas or topics that are more relevant to the minority language group, this only highlights the difference between the two and can end up strengthening the division. This tendency to teach to the majority obviously means that the minority language speakers are getting less out of the course than they could be in a more multilingual, or a completely monolingual, class.

The biggest problem with predominantly monolingual groups is the role of L1. The learners who share an L1 can use it with each other, but its benefits can’t be exploited by the teacher because this marginalises the students from a different L1 background. What tends to happen is that the majority group continue to use their L1 with each other, but they do it without the teacher’s blessing so they do it surreptitiously. This can lead to feelings that they are being denied a potentially useful learning tool and can cause resentment towards the teacher as well as the member(s) of the minority language group.

Of course, use of L1 by students is also a big issue for the students who don’t speak it. These students can find themselves missing out on peer learning that is taking place in L1 among the rest of the group, as well as whatever off-task discussions that may take place. Students from the minority language background have no idea what the rest of the group is saying. The dominant group could be explaining the task to each other, which is bad enough as it excludes the minority student, but they could equally be saying something derogatory about the minority student, and they have no way of knowing. Ultimately, whether it is deliberate or unconscious, there is a strong possibility that the student from the minority language background will experience feelings of exclusion.

Even if the teacher is able to create an environment where English is widely used, there can still be divisions between the majority and minority language groups. Learners with the same L1 can often understand each other more easily because they are all making the same errors. The minority group member, on the other hand, who makes different errors or has different strengths and weaknesses and, may be perceived by the other students as being weaker and, consequently, not worth talking to. The rich diversity and resulting cross-cultural interest and learning that happens in a truly multilingual class is far less likely to happen in a predomonolingual environment, or at least it requires some careful nurturing from the teacher. My Hungarian students used to complain that they couldn’t understand the Libyan student, even though his pronunciation was no worse than theirs, just different. My Arabic-speaking students in Malaysia couldn’t understand why a Chinese student was studying at the same level as them, until they saw her writing. And even then, they didn’t feel they could learn anything by talking to her.
In some of our classes at the moment there is a dominant language group and a core of students who are unwilling or perhaps unable to give up their use of L1. We have tried all sorts to highlight the benefits of using English – encouraging, cajoling, praising and rewarding the use of English; warning, banning, ridiculing and punishing the use of L1. But they continue to show remarkable resistance to the idea of “playing the game” and speaking to each other in English. They also seem very aware of the potential benefits of using translation. If this was a monolingual class then it would be much less of an issue as I would be able to exploit the advantages this brings. But when there are other people in the room who don’t understand your language, it’s rude, and possibly offensive, to use it. They might not be slagging off that other student’s national habits, but they might be. That student has no way of knowing, and neither do I. The predomonlyngual class is therefore fraught with potentially serious issues. While it is very easy for most students to use L1 with each other, it is really important that they don’t for the sake of the one or two other students. This then puts further strain on the relationship between the dominant and dominated nationalities, and can cause tensions.