



How to teach mixed-ability classes

Teaching mixed-ability classes is a challenge most teachers face at one time or another. In fact, to a certain extent, all classes are mixed ability. Students learn at different speeds, in different ways, and they are individuals with different learning preferences and interests. We normally use the term 'mixed ability' when these natural differences are wider than usual. But it is a simplification to think that in a mixed-ability class some of the students are weak and others strong; in practice, some of the 'weak' students may just take longer to understand what is being taught. In addition, students who seem weak in language skills are often strong in other academic areas and cognitive abilities, so it is important to provide ways for those strengths to be used. The most important concern for the teacher is how to engage all the students so that each one has a sense of challenge, progress, and achievement.

When students are engaged, their motivation and confidence increase. Providing opportunities for students to work at their own level or to work cooperatively gives them all achievable challenges, and means that they are less likely to become frustrated because they can't keep up, or bored because they finish too fast. Planning for different ways of engaging a mixed-ability group may take a little time, but the results are well worth the effort.

Ten tips for teaching mixed-ability classes

1 Use pairs

Pairwork is a useful way of involving all your students in an activity. Depending on the activity, you might decide to use same-ability pairs, for instance when working on fluency. This way, weaker students aren't overshadowed by stronger students, and stronger ones don't feel held back. You could also try mixing abilities, and see how weaker students can learn from the stronger ones. To save time in class, decide before the lesson who you want to work together in pairs.

2 Use groups

This is another way of making sure all your students are actively engaged with the lesson topic. It gives them time to work with their friends and at their own pace, rather than having to work at the teacher's pace and keep up with the rest of the class.

3 Encourage cooperation

Use activities that make students work together, rather than against each other, to achieve the outcome. Such tasks promote interdependent and supportive relationships in the group rather than competitive ones.

4 Assign roles

Assign roles to your students when doing activities, e.g. timekeeper, materials distributor/gatherer, group leader, note-taker, or spokesperson. This allows you to give everyone in the class a chance to contribute. It is a simple way of involving even those students who rarely take part. Such students are generally very happy to be given responsibility, and the confidence it gives them can spill over into their learning.

5 Make strong students the 'teachers'

Students who are always the first to give an answer or speak out are often keen to be stretched with bigger challenges, and can otherwise become disruptive or bored. One approach is to give them the role of teacher for specific activities. This allows them to show the class what they can do, and helps them develop a sense of responsibility.

6 Get students learning actively

If you have enough space in your classroom, some kind of physical activity or movement around the class is a great way to get students mixing and working together, regardless of ability. Activities that get students out of their seats mingling and working together are also very good from the point of view of variety and stimulation.

7 Recycle previous learning

Weaker students often find it difficult to recall work that has taken place in previous lessons, so it is useful to start lessons with short activities that recycle previous learning, such as memory games or quick quizzes.

8 Adapt activities

Adapt activities so that you can address the needs of faster and slower students. Have an easier version ready for weaker students or a harder version for stronger ones. You can also set up activities in which students have more or less challenging roles. Adapted activities require a little preparation, but the advantage is that everybody can do the same activity with the challenge adjusted to meet their needs.

9 Use extension activities

Have an extension activity as a backup for fast finishers. This can be a workbook exercise, an extra reading activity, writing questions about a text they've just read, or writing in their English diaries. With the stronger students working on their own, you can spend more time helping the weaker ones.

10 Use double standards when correcting

With a mixed-ability class it's reasonable to have different expectations of different students. Some stronger students might benefit from heavier



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correction (although this might not apply to all of them). On the other hand, be selective about how much or what you correct with weaker students. Think of correction as a tool for comparing students to their own previous achievements, rather than to others in the class, or to your own fixed standard.

Seven activities for mixed-ability classes

1 Ways of adapting activities

There are many ways to adapt activities to suit different language abilities. If, for example, a coursebook listening comes with a gap-fill comprehension activity, you can easily make a less challenging version by narrowing the choices down like this:

Original: *There is a large _____ in the kitchen.*

Easier version: *There is a large fridge/table in the kitchen.*

Alternatively, you could provide the weaker students with a word pool to use when selecting the right words for each gap. It is also a good idea to give different students different homework based on their level. For example, if you have worked on a news story about an accident in the street in a listening activity, weaker students could write the story in their own words, based closely on the original, and stronger students could write the story from a different perspective, adding the reactions of onlookers as well.

2 Creating a unit poster

This activity is a mini-project which involves the use of groups and encourages cooperation. It makes use of a variety of skills and allows students to take different roles in the completion of the task, as well as encouraging creativity. It is a useful way to end a unit and revise or recycle previously-learned language.

- 1 Work as a whole class and elicit the language you have recently practised. Put it on the board, e.g. *animals, can/can't*.
- 2 Divide students into several same-ability groups.
- 3 Explain that each group is going to produce a different poster.
- 4 Allow each group to look at the board and choose one area they want to make a poster about. Weaker groups can make vocabulary posters, stronger groups can focus on grammar.
- 5 Give out large sheets of paper and colour pens or markers.
- 6 Students work together and think of how to present new vocabulary or grammar in a way that helps to explain them. They can use rules, examples, pictures, etc.

7 Students present their posters to the class.

8 Display the posters around the classroom. This gives students a sense of achievement and helps them remember what they have learned.

3 Keeping an English diary

This is an ongoing extension activity that your students can do whenever they have time, such as at the end of a lesson, when they have finished the class work. Weaker students can do the same when you want to spend more time with the stronger ones.

- 1 Each student needs to have a small notebook to use as their diary.
- 2 Students can write about whatever they want, and as much or as little as they want – the focus should be on increasing fluency. They can include drawings or pictures to make it more like a scrapbook.
- 3 With your students' permission, you can occasionally collect and read their diaries, and give them feedback and suggestions that refer more to the content than to the language. If you give language feedback, it should be appropriate to the ability of the individual students.

4 Students teaching vocabulary

This activity combines most of the tips described on the previous page.

- 1 Before a listening or reading lesson, choose words which you want to pre-teach to your class. Write the words on individual pieces of paper.
- 2 In class, spread the words out on a desk.
- 3 If, for example, you have seven words, call seven strong students to the front of the class. Ask them to pick one word each, one that they understand and can pronounce well. Provide monolingual dictionaries, if necessary.
- 4 Explain that the students at the front are the 'teachers'. They are going to teach their words to the class. Each 'teacher' is responsible for their own word. They need to make sure that everybody else in class understands their word, can spell it, pronounce it, and, most importantly, remembers it when the activity is over. The 'teachers' can use whatever method they prefer, such as definitions, examples, comprehension questions, pictures, or mime, but not their native language.
- 5 Divide the class into groups, one for each 'teacher'. Give a short time limit for the 'teachers' to explain their word, before moving to another group to repeat the process.
- 6 Once all the 'teachers' have spoken with all the groups, ask one of the students in each group to explain one of the words they learned.



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5 Mind maps for writing

Mind maps are an excellent way of preparing mixed-ability classes for a writing activity. They require different kinds of skill – imagination, seeing connections between different ideas, seeing the whole picture, visual mapping skills, and language – so the activity engages students with a wide range of abilities.

- 1 Put your students in mixed-ability groups of four or five students each and give them three or four large pieces of paper and the topic for the mind map.
- 2 Tell the groups that they will make a rough plan of their mind map first and then produce a fair copy.
- 3 Get them to write the topic in the centre of the paper and to think of the main sub-topics. These should be evenly spaced around the main topic and joined to it with lines.
- 4 Now ask them to think of additional ideas for each of the sub-topics and again link them with lines. They should also link ideas across the mind map, where appropriate. This stage generates a lot of discussion, drafting, and redrafting and students should normally have as much time as they need.
- 5 Each group should now create their fair copy, and then practise how they are going to present their mind map to the others.
- 6 Each group presents their mind map to the rest of the class. All students will now have not only their own ideas for the writing task, but also all the other groups' ideas. If possible, they should have photocopies of each group's mind map to work from when they do their writing task.

6 Peer error correction

This works well as a follow-up after any free speaking activity, such as communication board games, group problem-solving, or role-plays.

- 1 Set up the speaking activity in same-ability groups.
- 2 While they are working, prepare the same number of sheets of paper as there are groups. Write a group name at the top of each sheet. Draw a line halfway across each sheet to make two sections. Put right (or a smiley face) in the top section, and wrong (or a sad face) in the bottom section.
- 3 Move around each group and monitor the students, taking your sheets with you. Listen to each group for long enough to hear most students speak. With shy students, you might need to do this subtly, perhaps from a little distance or with your back to the group, pretending to listen to someone else.

- 4 Take notes of the language your students use, listing examples of correct and incorrect use in the corresponding sections of the sheet of paper. Don't write who said what.
- 5 When the speaking activity is over (or in the next lesson), give each group their sheet. Tell them this is the language they used. Explain what the two sections mean.
- 6 In the same groups as before, students read through the sheets together, noting the good points, and correcting the mistakes. Meanwhile, monitor and help when necessary. This encourages and reinforces self and peer correction, and builds students' confidence. Students may or may not recognize their own errors, but this is not the main point of the activity.

7 Dictogloss

This is a kind of dictation, where students take notes rather than writing down every word, and then work together to reconstruct the text. It works well as an introduction to a topic, text, or listening; or as revision, using a text your students are already familiar with.

- 1 Choose a short text; the difficulty needs to be carefully judged so that it works with the steps below.
- 2 Put students in mixed-ability pairs.
- 3 Explain you are going to read a text three times at a natural speed.
- 4 Read out the text the first time. Students just listen, and must not write anything.
- 5 Students work together and write notes on the main points of the text.
- 6 Read out the text a second time; students listen again and then work together, adding details to the main points in their notes.
- 7 Read out the text for the third time. Students add any other details they have missed.
- 8 Students work in pairs to reconstruct the text. Their text may be different from the original, but it must communicate the same meaning.
- 9 If you want to spend more time on this, put two pairs together. They should compare their two texts, and produce a combined final version.
- 10 Finally, hand out the original text to each pair so that students can compare it with their versions.



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