

Mixed-ability ESL classes are very common in schools and universities throughout the world. Depending on a school's system of assessing and grouping their students, these mixed-ability classes often consist of students with varying levels of English from pure beginner to upper-intermediate. On top of that, students in mixed-ability classes usually come from different learning backgrounds. Not surprisingly, this can be overwhelming for the teacher and students alike. This article will address the challenges that this type of class poses and will cover some strategies and activities you can use to overcome them, ultimately creating a positive atmosphere for learning.



What are the benefits of teaching mixed-ability ESL classes?

When you think of mixed-ability classes, what comes to mind? Does the thought of teaching this kind of class feel intimidating? Perhaps you might wonder if students even benefit from being with other students who are not at the same level. On the contrary, students benefit in many ways from mixed-ability ESL classes. This type of class is an opportune environment for cooperative or collaborative learning, it is also referred to as peer teaching by some scholars, which is a common method implemented by teachers to support mixed-ability groupings.

Research has also shown that the pairing or grouping of students at different levels helps to promote active learning because their support of lower-level students helps to reinforce their own learning. Even though the weaker students may appear to gain more from this pairing; this pairing is mutually beneficial for both students in terms of language learning. Higher-level students gain not only self-confidence but are also more likely to retain what they learn by helping their classmates. Furthermore, students develop team-building skills and learn to communicate within a group to achieve the tasks set in class. Studies have also stated that this teamwork greatly influences the development of supportive relationships and greater self-esteem. Depending on the classroom dynamics, higher-level students who guide and support their classmates, help to motivate their peers to complete the set task. In both cases, the students learn and develop collaborative skills. As you can see, having a diverse class has its benefits, and implementing the right strategies can be a rewarding experience for both the teacher and the students.

Classroom dynamics for mixed-ability classes

When teaching students of mixed ability, it is important to consider classroom dynamics. Try to vary pair work and group selections as often as possible. In a freer practice activity like a role play or discussion, you might think about pairing students at the same level. If you pair strong students together, give them a slightly harder task. In this case, it would be best to notify students of how much time they have to complete the task. However you decide to run the ESL class, keep the students informed of your intentions. This will help the students to adapt better as you want to try to create a positive learning environment for everyone.

All students should feel supported in the classroom. If you have students well above the level of their peers, it comes as no surprise to hear, "Teacher, I'm finished." To support these students, give them something productive to work on. It is always handy to have extra activities or questions ready for them to complete. For more examples, read the next section which addresses differentiated learning. Keeping these higher-level students engaged and occupied gives you more time to support students who require more assistance as well. Short one-to-one sessions can also help, especially if you observe a couple of students struggling on a particular section of an activity.

The way that teachers correct or give immediate feedback to their students also has an impact on the classroom environment. To support mixed-ability ESL classes, it is best to address a language-related mistake to the class as a whole so that no one feels singled out. If a couple of students are struggling with the same concept, do a mini-lesson after the activity or get the students to participate in a review game to keep their spirits high.

When it comes to language learning, lowering anxiety is an important factor to consider. Studies have shown that classrooms with high anxiety levels, negatively affect students' ability to learn the target language. The classroom environment, the teacher's attitude, and the students' awareness of the expectations all affect good behaviour management. Building rapport with your students and setting expectations such as how to be a good learner or good classmate are also effective strategies that teachers can use earlier on in the year.

How to incorporate a differentiated learning method

On the other hand, it is also possible that mixed-ability pairings or groupings can cause pressure and frustrations for everyone involved. In this case, it is important to reflect on the kinds of materials and activities being incorporated and even how lessons and instructions are delivered in the classroom. This is one of the biggest challenges for teachers. You might find that advanced students start to underachieve if the tasks given are inappropriate for their level. Weaker students may also feel pressured in the classroom as the tasks may be beyond their capability. The teacher needs to find the right balance of materials that are both interesting and challenging for the students.

Differentiated learning is one way of tackling this issue. Teachers can incorporate a differentiated method by having a wide variety of resources on hand to use in the classroom. Although it may be time-consuming at first, adapting materials is one of the best ways to support the varying levels in the classroom. It is as simple as changing up the activities or tasks like introducing and alternating between comprehension checking questions, open-ended questions, crosswords, matching, multiple-choice, or even by playing a fun team building game. You can also try the following ideas recommended by many experienced teachers:

- For each activity, provide easy, medium, hard level questions
- Incorporate graded readers into the course (ability appropriate materials)
- Use sentence starters or prompts
- Implement realia

The main purpose of differentiated learning is that your students have access to materials that help them to learn more effectively in the classroom. Incorporating this method helps students to be more self-aware of their goals, it gives more opportunities for growth and also gives them the choice to choose challenges when they feel ready. That is why the execution of this method is key. Try introducing these materials in your lesson by scaffolding. Scaffolding is a way of introducing concepts or tasks in manageable stages. Let's take the sentence starters activity as an example. Before getting the students to write, the first step would be to brainstorm ideas as a class on a topic. If there is any key vocabulary that needs to be covered, have this visible to everyone in the classroom. Once the language aspect is covered, you can move on to model the activity or task. Give a clear example of how to use the sentence starter or prompt. For more advanced students, you can have higher-order questions prepared for them to do once they complete the activity. Higher-order questions encourage students to think more critically or apply what they have learned.

The truth is that these methods take time to get used to. When creating activities that involve mixed pairings or groupings, try emphasizing that there is a task for everyone to do. In a group presentation project, for example, encourage your students to take on different roles. One student can focus on finding information, while another student can create visuals or pictures, another student might come up with questions, and so on. When students have a clear idea of what they are doing, it helps them to feel empowered in their learning.

Assessing mixed-ability ESL classes

It is also important to think about how students are being formatively assessed. If you have a mixed-ability class, using a wide range of assessment options gives students opportunities to succeed. For example, to assess students' knowledge of a recently learned topic, you could provide options such as a journal-writing assignment, a presentation, a visual-arts project, among others, to encourage and give students the chance to demonstrate their growth and progress in the class. These small changes can help to break a monotonous learning cycle and keep students looking forward to what they will learn next.

Of course, it can also take time to determine the needs of each student in the class. Being aware of the problems mixed-ability classes face helps the teacher tackle any problems quickly. The primary focus should be given to ascertaining students' true proficiency. To do this, you could collect data from pop quizzes, diagnostic or placement tests, timed writing activities, or simply by observing students within the first weeks of class. Regular formative assessments are also particularly useful in a mixed ability class. Creating a portfolio, for example, not only helps students to see their progress in the class but can also give teachers more information about their students' strengths, weaknesses, language needs, learning styles, and strategies.

Doing these types of formative assessment can also help to determine how to incorporate a differentiated approach. After collecting this information, use your students' answers to formulate an action plan. Talking directly with the students is one way to help everyone understand the situation and how to improve it. You may even decide to have an open-class discussion and select different approaches according to the students' views. Once a plan has been drawn up, explain it to the students and get their agreement. Doing this allows your students to understand what is expected of them, and it will also help get the students' cooperation and make the class run smoother.

Activities for mixed-ability classes

As mentioned earlier, varying the types of activities used in class has a positive effect on students' learning and the classroom environment as a whole. It is important to remember that strategies and activities are not one-size-fits-all. In other words, what may work for one class, may not work for another. Therefore, the activities chosen to implement in a class are completely up to the teacher's discretion, and the success of each activity is based on a variety of factors such as classroom dynamics, students' learning styles, students' mood or energy levels, the topic or theme of the lesson, and so on. However, there are a couple of activities that work well no matter what level your students are at.

Mingling activities work well in mixed-ability classes. A mingling activity is where students interact with many other members of the class to perform a task. An example of this would be a 'Find someone who' activity. Try Pelmanism games, matching games, or team games, as these are also effective ways of keeping students motivated and engaged. Including English-related games in the classroom can also help students to build meaningful connections with each other, which can make it easier for them to do pair work or group work in future activities. All the activities mentioned can be found throughout the Teach-This.com website.

Teaching Mixed-Ability ESL Classes

Teaching mixed-ability classes is not always a walk in the park, but it does not have to be a complete nightmare. In this article, we have discussed that while mixed ability ESL classes may present some challenges, they are not impossible to overcome. Teachers who take on these classes should try their best to set their expectations earlier on in the class and conduct a series of formative assessments to determine how to best help their students. These are the first couple of steps that can surely help to create and sustain a positive learning environment for all your students, no matter what level they may be.