

### 3 Mixed-level classes

*I'd enjoy teaching a class where the students all had similar levels, but my class has such mixed levels, it seems almost impossible to teach them together.*

#### Aim

To offer work at different levels within the same class.

#### Introduction

One of the most common complaints from teachers is that their class has too wide a range of levels in it. If the teacher goes at the speed of the faster students, she loses the weaker ones; if she goes at the speed of the weaker ones, then the stronger students get bored.

Although there are no easy solutions, this unit offers a number of ideas to try.

Many of the possible solutions involve variations on two options: either dividing the class (i.e. separating the different levels out) or offering *differentiated* work (i.e. different work to different people).

#### Techniques: Some ways of dividing the class

- 1 Make short-term pairs or threes (e.g. for a single task), deliberately mixing stronger and weaker students together.
- 2 Make long-term pairs, threes or groups (maybe for a month or half term), each including one stronger student who is openly given the task of guiding and supporting the other students.
- 3 Divide the class into two halves (or more subdivisions if useful) for some parts of each lesson. Prepare tasks at two (or more) different levels. While one part is working independently on a task, you can work with the other half. Later, you can swap over, giving a task to students in that group while moving over to teach and work with the other.

In deciding whether to divide your class or keep it together, there are a number of pros and cons to consider:

	May be good because ...	May be problematic because ...
Separating weaker and stronger students into halves/pairs/groups:	<p>Students can work together with peers of a similar level.</p> <p>Stronger students can go ahead at their own pace, not being held up by slower ones.</p> <p>Weaker students can contribute more and work at their own level, without being discouraged or outshone by faster peers.</p>	<p>Some students might start to feel that they are 'better' than the others. They might behave rudely or unkindly to other groups.</p> <p>There may be some loss of class identity. Students may feel themselves a part of their subgroup more than a member of a single class.</p>

	May be good because ...	May be problematic because ...
Keeping the class as a single mixed-level group:	<p>Stronger students can support the weaker ones. They improve their own skills and gain a better understanding of lesson content through trying to help others understand it.</p> <p>Weaker students benefit from hearing stronger students using English.</p> <p>A class identity is maintained and grows.</p> <p>An atmosphere of mutual respect and support can be encouraged.</p>	<p>Stronger students may find the class slow. They could get bored waiting for weaker ones to answer questions, say or write things.</p> <p>Stronger students get frustrated at frequent wrong answers and teaching that is directed to issues they feel they already understand.</p> <p>Stronger students talk over or ignore the weaker ones.</p> <p>Weaker students can't keep up and 'switch off' or misbehave.</p> <p>Maybe it isn't fair on the strong students to be required to support and teach the weaker ones?</p>

### Technique: Split-and-combine workflows

A split-and-combine workflow is one where the whole class starts work on something together, but, later in the lesson, different subsections of the class separate off to do different work (maybe the same tasks at a different pace, or tasks that have a similar focus, but with different challenge levels). These groups then later come back together ... and so on. For example:

Stage	Subgroup 1 (stronger)	Subgroup 2 (weaker)
1	Lead-in discussion.	
2	Teacher input on grammar point.	
3	Students work without supervision on Practice Exercise 1.	Teacher sits with subgroup to review and reinforce the input, answering questions and checking understanding.
4	Class does a restricted speaking exercise together (e.g. drill).	
5	Teacher sits with subgroup and offers more challenging speaking practice.	Students work on Practice Exercise 1.
6	Students work on Practice Exercise 2.	
7	Teacher checks answers to Exercise 1 with the whole class.	
8	Students from Subgroup 1 act as teachers to Subgroup 2 while they try to answer Practice Exercise 2.	

## Techniques: Differentiated worksheets

Prepare separate tasks, exercises and worksheets for different levels:

- 1 Make unified worksheets that include a range of question types – easier and harder, perhaps divided by a horizontal line on the page. Ask weaker students to complete only questions above the line and stronger students to do the whole page. Alternatively, you could have a core set of questions that everyone has to do, but add on follow-ups after each question for those who want to go deeper, as in this example from a reading comprehension worksheet:

	Everyone must do these questions.	Do these questions if you have time.
1	Where did Imelda go after swimming?	Why didn't she go to the café with her friends?
2	What time did she get home?	Why were her parents angry?

- 2 Set the same task in a choice of versions. For example, offer an open writing task for stronger students (Worksheet A) and a similar task for weaker students, but with added support, e.g. guiding questions, a partially-written text or a list of ready-made phrases (Worksheet B).

A

You are going to make a short business trip to Sydney, Australia. Write an email to the Royal Swan hotel, asking if they have any vacancies. Explain when you want to stay, and ask about the prices. Think of one special request you have for your stay, and enquire about that too.

B

You are going to make a short business trip to Sydney, Australia. Write an email to the Royal Swan hotel. Use the notes below to help you.

Ask if they have any vacancies for three nights beginning 7th January.	Dear Sir or Madam, Do you ...
Say that you need a single room with internet access.	I need ...
Ask how much it will cost.	How much ...
Make a special request. (Think what you want to ask for!)	I would like ...
Thank them. Say that you look forward to hearing from them.	Thank ...

- 3 Set the same worksheet for everyone, but have add-on tasks ready for students who finish early or need a greater challenge.

### Techniques: Multilevel tasks

Offer multilevel tasks, i.e. tasks which are the same for everyone, but which have different outcomes, depending on what students can do. These include tasks that do not just have single correct answers, but instead offer a variety of more open-ended outcomes. Here are some more examples of multilevel tasks:

- 1 **Making sentences** A task that asks students to make as many sentences as they can from a selection of words, prefixes and suffixes. Stronger students will push themselves to find longer, more challenging sentences while weaker students should still be able to make a reasonable number.
- 2 **Making stories** All students can be asked to prepare a story on a particular topic or title. Students will naturally work at their own current level, and you can give feedback and guidance suitable for what they are able to do. You can offer different resources if it's helpful, e.g. lists of useful vocabulary, phrases or structures – and these too could be graded.
- 3 **Poster-based tasks** Place posters around the room with different tasks or questions on them. Your class can wander around, adding comments, ideas and answers in any places they want to. When everyone has finished, you can review the work together, perhaps gathering the class round each poster to discuss it.

### Techniques: Letting students choose what to do

- 1 Let students choose their own tasks, work speeds, outcomes, etc. Rather than imposing your own plans and expectations, allow students to make these decisions. This could be via discussion and planning, or by a simple, on-the-spot choice, such as by using a marketplace: Place tables with chairs in key locations around the room. Prepare a number of different activities (speaking, writing, listening, reading), and place copies on the tables so that each table has multiple copies of one task. Label the tables clearly with a table name (e.g. 'A'), a task name, a short description of the task, difficulty level and an approximate range of times for completing it (e.g. 10 to 20 minutes) – or prepare a 'menu' handout with the same information. In class, let students browse around and then do whichever tasks they want to for as long as they want to. Set individual goals if you wish (e.g. by the end of the lesson, you must hand in at least one completed writing task and one listening task).
- 2 Organise 'pass-it-on' tasks (suitable for individual, pair or group work); for example, students start doing an exercise. When the teacher rings a bell or taps the desk, they pass their exercise on and receive a new paper from the student to their immediate left or right, which they now continue working with (correcting, amending, adding as appropriate). In this way, a weaker student may start a task, but then pass it on to a stronger one who can edit and correct things, while the weaker student might receive a stronger student's answers to the questions he was just trying to do, and learn from them.

### Techniques: General suggestions for mixed-level classes

- 1 Ask for in-class learning support. Some schools appoint assistant teachers or invite parents or trainees in to help. An assistant teacher is supervised by the main teacher, but is able to work directly with students who need particular help in class.
- 2 Set different time requirements for different groups. Expect stronger students to work faster and do more tasks in the same time that it takes a slower group to do one or two.
- 3 Discuss and agree personal learning plans with each student. This would include discussing goals, materials, tasks and the kind of support they will need. Once done, this means that, for at least part of each course, every individual in your class can work on their own priorities at their own speed.
- 4 Use techniques in whole-class teaching that ensure that it is not only the louder, faster students who answer. techniques such as *not putting up hands*, *nominating students*, *not rubberstamping* in Chapter 5 Units 4 and 6.
- 5 Create a self-study area in the classroom. This might be a table along one wall or a corner. Place useful work materials and resources there, for example, photocopied exercises and worksheets, language games on a computer, digital film clips to watch with viewing tasks. When students have finished tasks set in class, they are encouraged to go over to the self-study area and choose something to explore on their own or with others.
- 6 Target questions creatively in whole-class work – asking more difficult questions to stronger students and less challenging ones to weaker students.
- 7 Differentiate homework. For weaker students, set work that repeats and consolidates work done in class, but offer stronger students tasks that extend and apply that work to challenge and move them forward. You could let students self-select their level, e.g. prepare three different homework worksheets and place them in piles on a table by the door labelled 'Easy', 'Medium', 'Hard' – and ask each student to choose one to take home.
- 8 Try teaching a lesson where, instead of overtly teaching language, you teach them how to do a real-world activity, either using real items (e.g. how to play the game mahjong) or using pictures, diagrams, mime, etc. (e.g. how to scuba dive). Your hope will be that language is learnt through the process of trying to understand the content. For example, you could do a lesson in which you aim to introduce your class to something that really interests you – maybe the joys of orienteering, or why *2001* is a great film, or how to repair a watch or how to enjoy Gilbert and Sullivan or ... whatever! Focus on helping them understand the content. Don't do any teaching of grammar or vocabulary, other than what is immediately needed for understanding the subject. You could ask learners to prepare a similar lesson themselves for future lessons.

The paradox of content teaching is that taking the focus off the language and putting it onto the subject still allows the language to be understood and learnt, and perhaps even more deeply. For a mixed-level class, the change of focus away from linguistic work may allow students who do not respond to a language-focussed lesson to shine in a new way.

- 9 Make sure that tests are fair to all. If not everyone has done all the work, you may either need separate tests or tests that are general proficiency tests and not directly linked to what has been studied. Design progress tests to let students demonstrate what they can do as opposed to what they don't know.

- 10** Don't panic about 'covering the book' (see Chapter 7 Unit 3).
- 11** Instead of trying to solve the apparent problem, might it be possible to 'dis-solve' it? Can you turn your own perception around so that you can start seeing these differences between individuals as a source of strength, as a resource, as a positive benefit, rather than as a deficit or weakness or a 'problem'?

### Techniques: Early and late finishers

You probably want to avoid having students who have finished early sitting around twiddling their thumbs for minutes while the slower ones finish their work. This means that it helps to spot the nearly-finished as early as possible – as this gives you time to vary or add to their task. Just because you gave a task instruction before they began doesn't mean that you can't alter the task while they are doing it.

#### 1 Early finishers: adding to tasks

A good tactic with early finishers is to give an extra task in addition to what they were originally asked to do. Often this can be asking them to combine previous answers into some compromise or summary viewpoint: 'Well done. I see you've nearly finished the task. So, now see if you can write one extra answer summarising the key things the expedition leader must remember.'

#### 2 Early finishers: preparing a report or presentation

If there is quite a lot of remaining time for an early finishing pair/group to fill, it can be very useful to ask them to prepare a public report back, e.g. a presentation of their ideas or answers.

#### 3 Early finishers: joining other groups

Send students to go and work with groups that are still working. You could instruct them to help or just observe. If they help, you may want to brief them on 'helping like a teacher', i.e. not just saying all the right answers straight away, but rather giving hints or suggestions to help the new group to find their own way.

#### 4 Slow finishers: easing tasks

Just as you can add to some groups' work, similarly, you can ease the load on those who are struggling; for example, 'Just do questions one to six. Leave the last four' or 'Don't discuss the second question. I only want you to agree what you will do about the first'.

### Technique: Reducing teacher workload for differentiation

If you decide that you want to increase differentiation in class, perhaps by using one or more of the techniques in this unit, you'll find that this probably gives you an increased workload. For example, instead of preparing one worksheet for your entire class, you might decide to include more tasks or questions, or even make two different worksheets. As the classroom teacher's day is already tiring enough, it's important that one doesn't accumulate too much extra work.

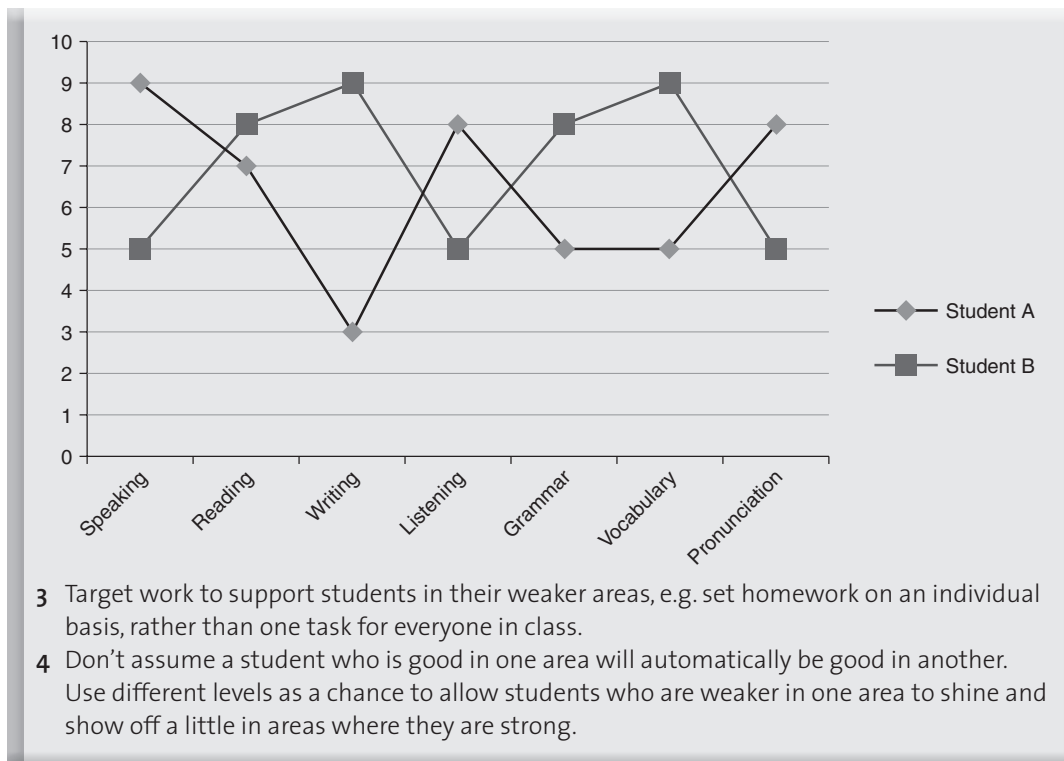
- 1 Find ways to offer differentiation without needing lots of extra material from you. Use digital texts where possible so that you can quickly edit texts, copy and paste questions and so on. Store all materials carefully so that you can access them again in future.
- 2 Exploit your coursebook. Don't assume that everyone has to do every task or exercise, or even every section or page or unit. Review your book, and decide which work is essential for all to do and which elements could be given to only some of the class. When making such decisions, don't sacrifice skills work, such as listening and speaking, for the sake of grammar input. Everyone needs a range of work on systems and skills, but they don't necessarily need to do all the work. If you think that reading or listening tasks in your coursebook are too difficult for your students, try keeping the same text, but offering different tasks to precede the coursebook tasks, easing students into the text more gently.

### **Technique: Understanding levels**

The level names we use for classes and students are a shorthand, a simplification, an average. When we learn that a student is A2, or 'elementary' or 'intermediate', it's important to remember that this doesn't tell us much about the individual. Each learner has a number of levels rather than one level – varying degrees of knowledge and skills over a range of systems or skills. For example, one student might be very good at listening and speaking while another might have a totally contrasting profile, being strong at writing and reading, but very poor at speaking and listening. Yet both are labelled intermediate and study in the same class.

We can't assume that all students in a class resemble one another in levels, beyond the fact that they average out somewhere in the same area. If the students have studied within the same school in the same culture, there is more chance of similarity – but if you are teaching a multilingual class with students from different places, then the mixed levels will really make themselves apparent. Whatever the name of your students' coursebook, remember that it doesn't give you any depth of insight into the real levels of learners in your class. They are all at different places on their own road of learning, each at a different 'somewhere-in-the-middle' point.

- 1 Get a better insight into levels by assessing your students in separate areas: speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.
- 2 Help learners to understand their varied level profiles by plotting their data as a simple graph (e.g. marking different levels for grammar, listening, pronunciation, etc). The resulting graph may well show a 'spiky profile', i.e. some distinct peaks and valleys.



### Technique: Coping with extreme mixed-level classes

Schools sometimes allocate what seems to be an impossibly wide range of levels to a class, e.g. beginners in the same room as post-intermediate. This may happen because students are placed in classes by age group or achievement in subjects other than English language level, or because of some necessity such as not having enough teachers or rooms. If you face this problem, consider making a permanent division within the class so that you have two (or maybe three) classes running independently and separately in different parts of the room, perhaps only bringing all the students together for certain games or movement activities that all can do. Share your time as fairly as you can between these sub-classes, though you are likely to find the lower level students needing more.

### Questions for reflection

- Is the mix of levels in your classes a significant problem for you? What strategies do you have for dealing with it?
- How do your students react to the range of levels? Is it something that they notice and comment on? Does it lead to any participation or behaviour issues?
- How do teachers of other subjects in your school deal with mixed-level classes? Do some teachers have well-worked-out differentiation strategies? Do some mainly teach at the speed of the fastest students?