

OXFORD

into the CLASSROOM

Mixed-Ability Teaching

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Introduction

Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.

MICHELANGELO

Who this book is for

This book is for teachers working with mixed-ability English-language groups. The prospect of teaching students of different levels can be daunting if you have relatively little classroom experience; at the same time, teachers with lots of experience under their belt might also be looking for strategies and techniques to help them get the best out of their mixed-ability groups. Whatever your own situation, the practical activities that this book contains can be adapted and tried out in your own classroom.

To some degree, all classes are mixed-ability. The ‘blocks of stone’ may all appear to be similar, but each one has its own unique potential and characteristics. As teachers, our job is to familiarize ourselves with the ‘raw materials’ with which we are working. It is only by becoming aware of students’ needs, strengths, and capabilities that we can identify the right tools with which to work. Successful mixed-ability teaching is therefore not about ‘forming’ students to match a template in our minds, but about enabling their own potential to be discovered and realized.

When we think about the different students that we teach, one of the first things we think about is language level. In a mixed-ability class, there is a significant difference in language proficiency between individual students. This alone creates a special set of challenges for the teacher. Although we refer to ‘stronger’ and ‘weaker’ students throughout the book, this is purely a description of linguistic ability. The knowledge that all individual students have a range of non-linguistic strengths that can and should be recognized is at the heart of the approach to mixed-ability teaching presented in this book.

Teachers have a decisive role to play in harnessing the potential of mixed-ability groups. Careful preparation, selection, and differentiation of activities can make language more accessible to learners. The way we plan classes and the decisions we take during lessons can go a long way to making sure that different students in a mixed-ability group are kept involved and motivated. We also need to be aware of our words and actions, remembering that effective communication means talking to different students in different ways. The way we speak to individual students and the feedback we give can have a huge impact on their attitudes to learning, and this is another important aspect of successful mixed-ability teaching.

The most important goal for a teacher is to help students become the best that they can be. For that we need an individualized approach to teaching and learning, complete with personalized outcomes that can differ from student to student.

We hope that this book will provide teachers with practical tools for discovering and freeing the potential of their own mixed-ability groups.

A word of reassurance

Most strategies that work with mixed-ability classes are simply good teaching strategies, and you probably know many of them already. You do not need to develop a whole new way of teaching, but you might need to apply your strategies more consistently and consciously to bring about a learning environment in which all of your students can make real progress.

How this book is organized

In Part 1 we will look at how we can best prepare for a mixed-ability group, including ways to find out about your learners and plan **differentiated** activities. Managing the classroom effectively is another important feature of successful mixed-ability teaching, and that is what we will focus on in Part 2. If you teach in a monolingual setting and share the native language of your students, then the ideas offered in Part 3 might suggest ways in which the students' native language can stimulate learning in your mixed-ability groups. Introducing new language and developing the four skills is a key component of English teaching – but how can it best be done in a mixed-ability setting? This is the question that we will address in Part 4. Although mixed groups present plenty of challenges for the teacher, in Parts 5 and 6 we will discuss the ways in which the differences between learners can add variety and value to our lessons, especially if we are able to introduce collaborative and cooperative working modes that energize and engage our students. In Part 7 we look at the options available for teachers who are interested in assessing their learners in ways that acknowledge individual learning needs and capabilities, perhaps in conjunction with more traditional forms of assessment. Finally, in Part 8 we will look at mixed-ability teaching in the broader context of interpersonal interaction, and at ways that recognizing and acknowledging the attitudes, emotions, and personalities of our students can lead to higher levels of motivation and a more harmonious classroom environment for everyone.

Although there are many links between the chapters in the book, you do not need to read it from beginning to end. Each chapter can be read on its own, and the ideas presented will give you tools and techniques that can be used with mixed-ability classrooms covering various teaching areas.

The main text of the book deals with the pedagogy behind each topic discussed within the mixed-ability context. *Try this* activities provide you with specific ideas and techniques that you can try immediately. *Getting it right* sections give procedural tips for some of the more specific suggestions. *Why this works* sections provide a pedagogic rationale for activities where important and helpful. In addition, there is a *Glossary* for words that appear in bold throughout the main text, a list of *Useful websites* for extending or developing activities online, and a list of *Frequently asked questions* which refer you to specific pages of the book itself to find the answers.

Part 1

Preparing for a
mixed-ability class

1

Identifying variables

A teacher's job is not only to teach the language – it is also to help learners engage with it. In order to know what kind of language to teach and how to teach it, we need to know something about the students we will be working with. By exploring the variables within and between learners in a mixed-ability group, teachers not only gain insights into the best way of approaching individuals within the group, but also begin to develop a sense of the defining features of the class as a whole.

Collecting data

A number of factors combine to give each class its own unique profile. The language level of students is a key variable, but it is by no means the only important criterion. Placement tests will provide information about students' language level, but the needs, attitudes, and personalities of the students also need to be explored. Questions to consider include:

- Why are the students learning English?
- What specifically do they need to learn?
- What is their attitude towards learning the language?
- How do they feel about being a member of this group?
- What are their interests outside school?

In certain cases, the teacher might already know the answers to some of these questions. Rather than making assumptions, it makes sense to ask the students themselves. Questionnaires, surveys, and specially prepared worksheets are particularly useful data collection tools for this purpose in the mixed-ability classroom. They can provide the basis for classroom activities that not only give us the information we need, but also offer natural opportunities for language practice. In addition, they enable teachers to send a clear message that they are interested in students' needs and preferences.

Questionnaires, surveys, and worksheets

Questionnaires designed by the teacher can be used to gather data about students' preferences regarding learning methods, topics, classroom activities, and types of input. We can also design activities so that students provide information about themselves: their personality, interests, and ambitions. A key benefit of doing this is that it helps students to think about different aspects of language learning and encourages them to prioritize their own needs. By guiding them to focus on their own learning, we can help them to become aware of their own responsibilities.

Try this  **Questionnaire about learning**

Design a simple questionnaire about learning English for the class. See the example below. The focus of the questionnaire should not be limited to aspects of language but can also include questions about learning methods and ways of working in class. Statements a–g provide a few examples of areas that can be addressed when creating questionnaires for mixed-ability groups. Discuss the questionnaire with the class afterwards.

Score each sentence on a scale of 1–5.

(1 = I disagree strongly, 5 = I agree strongly)

- a) I need to do more grammar practice activities. _____
- b) I would like to read more in English. _____
- c) I enjoy speaking activities in class. _____
- d) I need to improve my pronunciation. _____
- e) I think it is important to use technology in the classroom. _____
- f) I enjoy learning new vocabulary items. _____
- g) I do not like working in pairs and small groups. _____

Try this  **Survey about topics**

Look through the coursebook or syllabus for the year ahead and write the main topics on the board. Ask students to vote for their favourite topic. Create a simple bar chart or pie chart on the board to display the results. Working in pairs, students then select a topic and come up with a survey question about it. For the topic of 'school', for example, the survey question could be: *What is your favourite subject?* or *Which new subject would you most like to learn?* Students carry out their surveys, asking all of the members of the class in turn. Each pair displays their results in the form of a bar chart or pie chart.

Try this  **About me**

Create a gap-fill text for students to complete about themselves. See the example below. The content and language level can be tailored to suit your students.

About me

My name is _____ and I'm from _____. I live in _____, and in my free time I usually _____. I want to learn English because _____. I think I know a lot about _____. I'm good at _____. I can _____. I don't know much about _____ but I'd like to know more. I can't _____ but I'd like to learn how. People often say that I'm _____, _____, and _____. In the future, I'd like to _____ because _____.

Feedback

A certain amount of trial and error is involved in finding the best approach for each group. Teachers can get formal or informal feedback from students on particular activities or on the lesson as a whole. This can be done either by asking them directly, or by getting students to write down a few comments, in L1 if appropriate.

Observation

Teachers can gain useful insights into students by paying attention to how well they cope with the materials they are given, how they respond to certain activities, and how they interact with each other – especially when they think that no one is paying attention to them specifically! Informal observation of this kind essentially involves keeping our eyes and ears open during the lesson. Further examples of things to notice in students might include:

- how well they manage to focus on tasks
- how much time they need for tasks
- how willing they are to volunteer or to respond when called on
- whether they are prepared to ask for/give help.

Formal observation is also a possibility. The fresh perspective of an outside observer can help us to get a more rounded view of what is actually happening in the mixed-ability classroom. Getting a colleague to observe a lesson is not only easy to arrange, but also paves the way for the kind of mutually beneficial collaboration that occurs when colleagues share ideas and help each other openly and constructively.

Try this Teacher predictions

Invite a colleague to observe one or more of your classes. Choose two students that you would like to focus on. Write some notes about each student.

Think about:

- attitude towards learning
- personal traits and characteristics.

Make predictions about how you think each student will respond to the activities you have planned. Write simple sentences, as in Table 1.1.

Maria	Daniel
1 I think she'll talk in L1 to her neighbours during the first activity. Observer's comments:	1 I think he'll copy the answers to the first activity from Luis. Observer's comments:
2 I think she'll be cheerful and enthusiastic about volunteering for the speaking task. Observer's comments:	2 I think he'll be shy and will not volunteer for the speaking task. Observer's comments:
3 etc.	3 etc.

TABLE 1.1 *Teacher predictions about students*

Getting it right

Observation criteria

The observation criteria should be identified before the lesson and should be as objective as possible in order to make the job of the observer straightforward. An observation checklist should also be prepared before the lesson. It might help to make a set of predictions about certain students before the class and to discuss these with the observer. After the lesson, the predictions can be reviewed and assessed.

Why this works **Comparing predictions with outcomes**

Sometimes we label or pigeonhole our students without even being aware of it. The labels we subconsciously attach to them might be things such as 'She finds it hard to concentrate' or 'He never listens'. This is a potentially harmful tendency as these labels often become self-fulfilling prophecies. Comparing predictions with outcomes helps us to find out whether or not we truly know our students as well as we like to think we do. It also helps us to get a clear idea of whether certain tasks and activities are suitable for a particular mixed-ability group.

Reflecting on data

Completed questionnaires, worksheets, and feedback forms can be referred to regularly during the course of the year when planning activities for a mixed-ability class, especially when looking for ways to involve particular individuals. When displayed on the classroom wall, survey results can act as a reminder to the teacher about topics, areas, and working methods to explore. In the case of collaboration with colleagues, follow-up observations and discussions can help to fine-tune teachers' reflections and conclusions about handling the variables within the group.

Try this **Summarizing interests**

Share a summary of the data gathered from class questionnaires and worksheets and ask students to interpret it. Provide a range of helpful language for this purpose, such as: *No one likes ...*, *A few people like ...*, *Some of us like ...*, *Most people like ...*, *Everyone likes ...*. Get students to create a poster, bar chart, or pie chart to represent the preferences of the class.

2

Setting goals

Setting goals should be seen as a way of identifying strengths and areas to work on, based on the variables identified. The goals that are set should acknowledge the needs and preferences expressed by individuals, and attempt to find opportunities to engage them. At the same time, it is important to identify group goals that reflect the shared needs and preferences of the class.

There is a clear link between setting goals and achieving positive outcomes. Setting goals can focus minds, while achieving goals leads to a feeling of success. In the mixed-ability classroom, students should be given an active and participatory role to play in setting goals wherever possible, rather than always being presented with a list of goals that have been drawn up by the teacher.

We should also set goals for ourselves as teachers, making sure that we have a clear idea about the objectives we would like to meet with the group and the methods we intend to use for the purpose. This can be as simple as asking ‘What am I hoping to achieve in this lesson?’ and then spending a few minutes afterwards reflecting on the actual outcomes by taking brief notes.

Class goals

Goals can rarely be achieved merely by identifying desired outcomes and then hoping for the best. Instead, it is necessary to formulate the specific steps that need to be taken in order to achieve the end result we are looking for. This way, checking progress can become an established routine and an integral part of classroom procedure.

Goals can be set for single lessons or activities, in which case they should be discussed and written on the board. Alternatively, long-term objectives can be identified and displayed in the form of a poster on the classroom wall. Unless goals for mixed-ability classes are stated clearly and made public, it is hard for both teachers and students to be aware of them.

Try this

Class contract

Goals can be as simple as guidelines and ground rules. Discuss class goals with students. This can be done in L1 if necessary. Make sure that your objectives are clear and that they have been agreed upon by everyone. Draw up a class contract such as the example opposite. The contract should focus on the steps you need to take in order to achieve the goals you and the class have set for yourselves. Sign the contract, get students to sign it as well, and display it in the classroom.

Our goals

What we want to achieve:

How we intend to achieve our goals:

What we are prepared to do:

- *Every lesson we will* _____
- *Every week we will* _____

We promise not to:

Personal goals

Students should be encouraged to identify both language-learning goals and attitude goals, and to think about how they can be applied to learning both inside and outside the classroom. Examples of appropriate goals can be elicited, or teachers can supply examples by drawing on their own experience as language learners. Examples of language-learning goals might be: keeping a notebook for new words and reviewing it after every lesson, reading a newspaper article every day, or doing online grammar exercises for each completed unit in the book. Examples of attitude goals might be: arriving on time for class, not interrupting when others are speaking, or respecting the opinions of others in the group.

Try this **My personal goals**

Elicit a few examples of personal goals. Give students the template below to fill in individually.

My personal goals

By the end of the course I want to be able to ...

- _____
- _____
- _____

In order to do this, I will ...

- _____
- _____
- _____

I will spend about _____ hours this week/month/term on self-study to achieve these goals.

Signed: _____

Then put students in groups of four – their aim is to identify three common goals. Finally, discuss the common goals with the whole group. Try to come up with three or four goals for the entire class. Write them on a poster or large piece of card and put them somewhere in the classroom where they are clearly visible. Refer to them throughout the period of time that you have specified. At the end, the goals can be checked as a whole-group activity.

Try this  **Promises**

Get students to set goals for themselves at the beginning of the course. They can take the form of a promise or pledge relating to everyday behaviour, as in the example in Table 2.1. Ask students to write down their goals on a separate piece of paper. All students should be asked to consult their list of goals and check their progress at regular intervals. Students can occasionally work in pairs and review each other's goals.

Language-learning goals

I promise to:

- practise the pronunciation of new words using an online dictionary
- read a newspaper headline every day and translate it.

Attitude goals

I promise to:

- switch my phone off in class
- offer to help others whenever I can.

TABLE 2.1 *Student promises*

Try this  **Goal points**

Acknowledge the importance of goal setting by allocating students points when individual and group goals have been achieved. Keep a running score of the points awarded. When students have collected an agreed number of points, they can be awarded a top grade. Alternatively, points awarded for goal achievement can be incorporated into formal assessment, for example by including a goal-achievement component in continuous assessment. (See Part 7 for more information on assessing mixed-ability groups.)

 **Getting it right****Goal setting**

The following four questions provide a basis for making sure that goals are set appropriately.

- 1 *Can it be done?* Each goal that learners set for themselves needs to be realistic in terms of their abilities and the time available.
- 2 *Is it clear?* Each goal should be expressed as specifically as possible, and preferably in terms of action points. Students should be encouraged to express their goals in a way that is easy to check.
- 3 *How will it be achieved?* Students need to be able to see a clear path from what they do in class to the fulfilment of the desired goal.
- 4 *Is it what the student wants?* A goal is only likely to be achieved if it is self-determined and reflects the desires of students themselves rather than their teachers or parents.

3

Planning differentiated activities

Differentiated activities

Providing each learner in a mixed-ability class with materials tailor-made to suit their individual level is not a practical option: it would require far too much preparation and would be extremely difficult to manage. Instead, one of the ways that we can provide multi-level input is by preparing **differentiated** language-learning activities which share the same common core. Differentiated materials do not require excessive amounts of preparation; in any case, the additional time required in the preparation phase is often repaid in terms of time saved in the classroom. The positive effects of differentiation are not always apparent to students experiencing it for the first time; they might confuse it with discrimination. In fact, differentiation enables teachers to include all students in the learning process – something that students themselves are usually quick to appreciate. It is important, however, to be sensitive to students' feelings, and to avoid discriminatory language. For example, say *the green group and the purple group* not *the strong group and the weak group*.

Differentiating the input

One possibility is to provide different learners with an activity that has been differentiated according to language level. For a reading comprehension activity, we might create two alternative versions of the text in the book: one version adapted to make it more accessible for weaker learners, and another version adapted to make it more challenging for stronger learners. Learners then tackle one of the two texts, depending on their level. See the following example:

Standard text

Joanne 'Jo' Rowling OBE (born 31 July 1965) is a British author who wrote the Harry Potter books. She only uses the name 'J.K. Rowling' for her books: the 'K' stands for 'Kathleen' which was the first name of her grandmother.

Think about how this text could be changed to make it more/less challenging for learners. Some ideas are overleaf.

Alternative 1 (More challenging)

- 1 Use gaps
- 2 Use more difficult synonyms
- 3 Use anagrams
- 4 Provide more text to read

Alternative 2 (Less challenging)

- 5 Use simpler synonyms
- 6 Use images
- 7 Use L1
- 8 Add explanations to help understanding

The skeleton texts below include examples of all the options listed above for illustrative purposes. When adapting a text to use in the classroom, it is advisable to choose one option for each text in the interests of simplicity.

Alternative 1

Joanne 'Jo' Rowling OBE (born 31 July 1965) is a British author who wrote the Harry Potter books. She ¹o_____ uses the ²*pseudonym* 'J.K. Rowling' for her books: the 'K' stands for 'Kathleen' which was the first name of her ³*monthgrader*.

⁴(She received a degree in French and Classics at the University of Exeter. She worked at Amnesty International in London. The original idea for Harry Potter came to her on a train in 1990.)

Alternative 2

Joanne 'Jo' Rowling OBE (born 31 July 1965) is a British ⁵writer who wrote the Harry Potter books. She only uses ⁷*használja* the name 'J.K. Rowling' for her books: the 'K' stands for ⁸(=) 'Kathleen' which was the first name of her grandmother.

Differentiating the process

Another way of differentiating is to give students alternative ways of working with the same input, for example a set of questions. Students can then be given three separate ways of finding the answers to the questions: by reading a text, by completing a spoken information gap activity, or by doing individual research.

Here we are not differentiating the level of the input language. Instead, we are providing different options regarding how it is used – enabling students to work in their own way, at their own level, and at their own pace. See the example opposite.

All of the students in the group receive the same questions about the tallest building in the world:

The tallest building in the world

- 1 Which city is it in?
- 2 What is it called?
- 3 How many metres high is it?
- 4 How many floors has it got?

The teacher then differentiates by providing three varieties of input material.

Group A: Reading comprehension**Read the text and find the answers.**

Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, is different from other cities. It is a city of glass skyscrapers in the desert. One of these is the incredible Burj Khalifa skyscraper. It is 828 metres high and has got more than 160 floors. You can see it from 100 kilometres away!

English Plus Student's Book 1, Oxford University Press

Group B: Information gap

Read the text. It contains two of the answers. Then ask someone from Group C to read their text to you. Listen and write the missing information.

_____, in the United Arab Emirates, is different from other cities. It is a city of glass skyscrapers in the desert. One of these is the incredible Burj Khalifa skyscraper. It is _____ metres high and has got more than 160 floors. You can see it from 100 kilometres away!

Group C: Information gap

Read the text. It contains two of the answers. Then ask someone from Group B to read their text to you. Listen and write in the missing information.

Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, is different from other cities. It is a city of glass skyscrapers in the desert. One of these is the incredible _____ skyscraper. It is 828 metres high and has got more than _____ floors. You can see it from 100 kilometres away!

Group D: Individual research

Find the answers to the questions by using the internet.

Differentiating the output

Differentiating the output allows students to engage with topics in their own way by responding to **open questions** and prompts, rather than **closed questions**. In such cases, students do not all produce the same outcome. If we let students activate their own preferences and use the language they already know, then more personalized outcomes are possible. The teacher can then evaluate this work on its individual merits.

In order for this to work, we need to provide a common topic, but be flexible in the way we use it as the starting point for **open-ended tasks**. One way that this can be done is to give students a set amount of time in which to generate as much relevant language as they can. Another way is to provide a menu

of tasks at different levels from which students are free to choose the option that most appeals to them.

Try this

At the market

Give students the following task for homework.

Go to the fruit and vegetables section of a market/supermarket near your home. Choose one of these tasks:

- 1 Write down the names of as many of the fruits and vegetables as you can in English. Use your phone to take photos of them and finish the task at home.
- 2 Which fruit/vegetable is ...

a the most expensive?	e the heaviest?
b the cheapest?	f the longest?
c the most delicious?	g the ugliest?
d the most beautiful?	h not from your country?
- 3 Interview the person selling the fruits and vegetables – or the people buying them. Use your phone to record the interview. Translate the questions and answers into English.

Getting it right

Assigning differentiated tasks to students

When using differentiated activities in the classroom, resist the temptation to always assign certain tasks to particular learners. Very often it is not the differentiation itself that concerns students, but the fact that they do not have a say in how the allocation is made.

Deciding when to differentiate

The question of when to differentiate needs to be considered within the context of the lesson as a whole. Looking through the lesson plan and anticipating how students will respond to each activity can provide the basis for decisions regarding when to differentiate. When you do so, ask yourself the following questions:

- 1 Are students provided with choices and options at any time in this lesson?
- 2 Are there any opportunities for getting students to help each other in this lesson?
- 3 Are there any activities that might be problematic?
- 4 Are there any ways of making these activities more open-ended?

It is also important to consider the stage of the lesson and the **transitions** between activities. Differentiated activities can be used to change the **flow** of a lesson, for example to enable freer practice or creative language use following a closed activity.

Getting it right

When not to differentiate

It is important to remember that beginning and ending the class together is very important from the point of view of classroom dynamics. It sends a strong signal to the group of inclusiveness and togetherness. For this reason, it makes sense not to use differentiated activities at the very start of the lesson or right at the end.