
Multilevel Classes: Some Practical Suggestions

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Experienced teachers have learned a great deal over the years about making multilevel classes run more smoothly and inclusively. The following suggestions have been distilled from my own classroom experience as well as years of working with other teachers who have helped inform my practice.

1) Name the differences: Once a classroom begins to solidify as a learning community, it becomes clear that there is a wide range of differences in the class: skin color, first languages, experiences, interests, education, and so on. By naming and talking openly about the differences in the class, there is a better chance to “exploit” the richness inherent in those differences.

2) Clarify realistic goals: By negotiating realistic shared learning goals with students from the beginning, there is less likelihood of false expectations driving students and teachers crazy. Students’ individual learning plans might look strikingly similar to one another as they reflect common goals among the class; however, the teacher may be able to work with each student on one or two articulated goals that are specific to that student alone, especially if she can utilize support staff in the classroom. Once realistic learning goals are established, experienced teachers find ways to check in with students regularly, even if informally, to help them note progress in various areas. With regular assessment, students with a range of abilities can see that they are progressing at their own pace.

3) Encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning: By assisting students in becoming assertive “consumers” of their own education, teachers are providing transferable skills for students to become

more active in getting what they need out of a class. Addressing the importance of student responsibility early on in the learning cycle contributes to clearer expectations in teaching and learning—again, taking some pressure off of the classroom teacher. A few years back, Andy Nash, then an ESOL teacher in a workplace setting, devised a creative lesson for addressing student responsibility issues. She created an activity where students discussed the following sentence starters:

- A good teacher should _____
- A good student should _____

Then they translated their statements into ground rules for the class, stating clearly and publicly on newsprint:

- We (the students) will _____
- The teacher will _____

Many of these ground rules described taking responsibility for homework, participation in class, and other aspects of reinforcing classroom learning.

4) Wean yourself away from text-dependent activities: This is especially helpful for ESOL classes where approaches to teaching do not rely heavily on words. For example, try doing science experiments (like planting and growing seeds), cooking in class, or art projects (paper quilts, photo projects, pumpkin carving). This is not to say that the activities avoid language—not at all! But the *initial* focus on *doing* something rather than *reading* something allows the language to emerge from the participants. You can elicit language from the students as well as offer clarification by way of new language. During the activity, everyone can be in-

involved in some fashion, whatever their language abilities. This approach levels the playing field a little. You may want to follow up with more structured language practice based on the experiential activity: a multilevel language experience story, or pair work for reading and writing. (Thanks to teachers at the Jamaica Plain Community Center for some of these ideas.)

5) Adapt videos: Choose movies, movie excerpts, TV shows, commercials, soap operas. Select materials with a strong narrative or story and vivid characters so the dialogue does not have to carry the entire meaning and students of varying abilities can still participate in the viewing experience. Humor and slapstick work well, as do movies that connect to students' own histories. (*I Love Lucy* is always a hit; Charlie Chaplin offers silent movies to "flesh out" with language.) Develop listening, speaking, reading and writing activities around the viewing segment, depending on what students can handle.

6) Use a topic driven, rather than a skills driven curriculum: Negotiate with students which themes or topics they would like to see addressed in the curriculum. This way, students can be united around a topic in which they all share an interest. After initial introductions of lessons, students can branch off according to abilities in various areas.

7) Use grids and other open formats: The use of grids with simple headings (see sample grid below) allows you to elicit language from students as a whole class activity and can be adapted to a wide variety of subjects (immigration histories of students, job/work information, families). This approach is especially valuable for ESOL classes. After a grid is filled in with student information, the teacher can then use the information

with students of different language abilities, from asking simple Wh— questions to suggesting more detailed writing assignments. Everyone starts out with the same distilled information and it is allowed to expand according to students' abilities in the class.

8) Create long term projects: Some teachers help their classes create a simple newsletter that is published every few weeks. Others develop video projects. Some create cookbooks or publications of student writings. Long term projects allow students to assume responsibility for leadership roles and other tasks, depending on strengths and interests. Students can participate in a variety of ways and all contribute to a unified effort with an actual end result.

9) Teach to different groups at different times in the curriculum: Some teachers find it helpful to teach with an emphasis on the more proficient group of students at certain points in the cycle and to the less proficient at other times in the curriculum. Such an approach bypasses the tendency to always teach "to the middle." If teachers opt for such an approach, it's best to be clear with students what you are doing so they do not feel they will be left out entirely.

10) Allow for a range of learning styles: Sometimes students process their learning silently. Silence does not necessarily indicate boredom, confusion, or passivity. Try to find out what the silence means. It is also helpful to investigate with students how they learn best so teachers can help students work from strengths.

More opportunities need to exist for teachers to educate one another about these strategies and their underlying feelings about teaching in a multilevel class. •

NAME	COUNTRY	BORN	JOB	LIKES TO...
NGA	VIET NAM	1967	FACTORY WORKER	PLANT FLOWERS
JOSE	CUBA	1953	COOK	WATCH SOCCER
CHEN	CHINA	1962	CHILD CARE WORKER	PLAY THE PIANO
STELLA	COLUMBIA	1967	CLERK	PLAY WITH Her DAUGHTER
KOL	CAMBODIA	1954	NO JOB YET	Go to the movies
JAMA	SOMALIA	1961	PARKING ATTENDANT	DANCE and SING