



Planning creatively for mixed-level young learners

What approaches can teachers of young learners take when they find a wide range of levels in their classes? One approach is to *teach to the middle* and plan activities that are right for the middle level learners, but this can leave weaker learners without enough support and stronger students without enough challenge. Another approach is to plan different activities for the different levels in your class, but this often means an enormous amount of preparation. So how can teachers best plan for mixed-level classes? In this article, I will provide examples of how to be creative when preparing or adapting activities so that all learners in mixed-level classes are included.

Plan activities with different tasks for different levels

Dictations, reading and dialogues can work well for all levels if we plan different activities.

Dictations

Dictations can be tough for learners of all levels. Listening for individual words, understanding, spelling and punctuation all come into play. We can help weaker learners by offering the class a choice of task: learners can write either the complete text or just the key vocabulary. For example, in this text about a giant and his meals, weaker learners can just write the food words:

Jack the Giant

'Jack the Giant likes eating and he's always hungry.'

'For breakfast, he has five eggs, ten sausages and a bucket of orange juice.'

'At lunchtime, he has six salads, nine pizzas and three ice creams.'

'Dinner is his favourite meal. He usually has three chickens, twenty carrots and five plates of potatoes.'

The learners use the text as a model to write a similar text about another imaginary character. Stronger learners then get the chance to use a wide range of food vocabulary.

Reading

It is important to prepare learners well before doing any reading activity. With a text about tigers, ask the class to tell you what they know about tigers, where they live, what they eat and so on. Discussing the title and illustrations and pre-teaching unfamiliar vocabulary can help all learners, especially the weaker ones.

After reading, offer learners different activities:

- Stronger learners answer questions. If they are teenagers, they can then go on to write a summary of the text in 50 words or a short text giving their opinion. Primary-age learners can look back at a text and find vocabulary, for example, *Find two countries where tigers live.*
- Help weaker learners by writing possible answers on the board or give true/false statements about the text instead of questions. Allowing learners to compare answers in pairs before correcting them as a class can help too.



Dialogues

One approach with dialogues in a mixed-level class is to write a dialogue on the board. It might begin like this:

Narrator: 'It's a sunny day at the park. A squirrel and a bird are talking in a tree.'

Squirrel: 'What are the humans doing today?'

Bird: 'I can see a man. He's writing on his computer.'

Squirrel: 'Oh yes and look at that woman. She's roller-skating really fast.'

Bird: 'Can you see that boy? He's flying a kite.'

Read and say the dialogue by taking one part and asking the whole class to say the other. Then ask the class to practice the dialogue in pairs. After that, ask the learners to work in pairs and write their own version of the dialogue with a minimum of six changes. Stronger learners are free to make a lot of changes and use a wide range of vocabulary, while others can make the six changes in a simpler way. Follow on by asking pairs to perform their dialogues for other pairs of the whole class.

Plan open-ended tasks

Closed-ended items have only one right answer and are typical of many grammar gap-fill exercises. For example:

'Yesterday, Lisa ... computer games for two hours.' (play)

'Last week, Ali ... a birthday cake for his mum.' (make)

By contrast, open-ended items can have several or many right answers and allow learners to be more creative and imaginative with language. They can appeal to stronger learners, but still provide a framework for the weaker ones. For example:

'Yesterday, Lisa ... for two hours.'

'Last week, Ali made ...'

Beyond the gap-fill, ideas for creative open-ended tasks include:

- Read the first half of a story and then write the ending.
- Imagine an island. Draw and label a map of the island and then write about the people and animals that live there.
- Think of a famous person (real or imaginary, current or from history) and write a *Day in the life of ...* report.

Lateral-thinking activities are also open-ended and as Ur (2012) points out, they offer all learners a chance to contribute. Try giving your learners a piece of paper with ten circles on and inviting them to draw what they like in the circles: a face, a plate of food, a clock etc. Allow them to mingle and talk about their ideas. Learners of all levels will come up with interesting and surprising ideas to fill their circles. (This was an idea presented by Sarah Philips at the IATEFL conference in Madrid, 1996).

Use games and competitions

While no teacher would want to generate a highly-competitive classroom atmosphere, planning for an element of friendly competition can be motivating for young learners of all levels. An example of this is to get learners to work in pairs and write as many *present continuous* or *there is/are* sentences about a picture within a five-minute time limit. Learners are motivated to write the most sentences, but can also work at their level, with stronger learners using a wider range of vocabulary.



Have a variety of activities and pace

Plan classes with a range of activities, paces and groupings:

- Have some 'heads up' activities which involve the whole class listening, watching a clip or speaking in pairs, but also some 'heads down' activities where learners are writing, drawing or doing exercises.
- Have short, fast activities like games, as well as longer reading and writing tasks.
- Allow learners to work in pairs, groups and teams, as well as individually.

Make the most of visuals

All learners can benefit from visual input, but especially the weaker ones. You can:

- Introduce new vocabulary with flashcards, posters or online images.
- Watch short clips to introduce new topic areas.
- Display word posters and have picture dictionaries available in class. Or alternatively, get the learners to make their own word posters and picture dictionary pages.
- Provide learners with visual models of activities. For example, if you want the class to draw and label a picture of an amazing new animal that has just been discovered, then prepare one yourself before class.

In conclusion

All classes are mixed-level to some degree and catering for a range of abilities and needs will always be a part of a teacher's job. When planning, remember to draw on all the resources available. Many of the teacher's books which accompany course books nowadays have extension ideas and worksheets for higher-level learners and reinforcement activities for weaker ones. New ideas can be found on the internet or by speaking with colleagues as sharing ideas is often a great starting point. And, of course, we should observe and talk to our learners too. Finding out about their interests, their preferences for activities, what helps them learn and what they find easy or difficult can help us plan classes that cater for their different needs

References

Ur, P (2012) *Teaching Mixed Level Classes*
[scribd.com/doc/219333583/Penny-Ur-Teaching-Mixed-Ability-Classess](https://www.scribd.com/doc/219333583/Penny-Ur-Teaching-Mixed-Ability-Classess)
(Available to download from apac.es/publications/)

Further Reading

Jo Budden, teachingenglish.org.uk/language-assistant/teaching-tips/adaptingmaterials-mixed-ability-classes