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Teaching Mixed-Ability Classes

Mixed-ability ESL/EFL classes are very common in schools and universities throughout the world. These classes consist of students with varying levels of English from pure beginner to upper-intermediate. Furthermore, students in mixed-ability classes usually come from different learning backgrounds. As an ESL/EFL teacher, there are strategies you can use to overcome the challenges that this type of class poses.

Students benefit in many ways from mixed-ability ESL/EFL classes. Advanced students receive satisfaction from helping lower-level students, and students in a mixed-ability class develop strong ties with their classmates. Students can also learn how to become independent learners by learning at their own pace. Furthermore, students learn how to communicate within a group to achieve the tasks set in class. Having a class that is diverse is interesting not only for the students but for the teacher as well.

The biggest challenge for teachers is definitely finding the appropriate teaching materials and activities. The teacher needs to find the right balance of materials that are both interesting and challenging for the students. This can be difficult due to the varying abilities of the students and their different backgrounds. You might find that advanced students start to underachieve if the tasks set in class are inappropriate for their level. Other students may even intimidate them, if they are more introspective. Weaker students may also feel pressured in the classroom as the tasks may be beyond their capability. 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.

Needs analysis is the best way to determine how to teach more effectively in a mixed-ability class. You can find out the students' strengths, weaknesses, language needs, learning styles and strategies.

Here are some questions you might want to ask:
Do you like to work on your own or with a partner?
What kind of class activities do you enjoy doing?
Which types of English skills would you like to develop?
Do you like participating in group work?
Why do you want to learn English?

Afterwards, you can collect the answers and formulate an action plan. Talking directly with the students will help everyone understand the situation and how to improve it. You may 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. This will help get the students' cooperation and make the class run smoother.

Try to pair weaker students with stronger students. However, in a freer practice activity, you might think about pairing stronger students together. Try to vary pairwork and group selections as often as possible. If you pair strong students together, give them a slightly harder task. However you decide to run the ESL/EFL class, keep the students informed of your intentions. This will help the students adapt better. You want to try to create a positive learning environment for everyone.

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. These types of activities can be found in our [Resources Section](#).