MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES

How to give every learner the right level of challenge and support, without planning a different lesson for each

AT A GLANCE

What it is	teaching classes where learners differ noticeably in level, pace, confidence or skills, which in practice means almost every class
Key idea	**differentiation**: varying content, process or product so that every learner is challenged and supported
Key message	you don't need a different lesson for every learner; a few flexible strategies, used regularly, make a big difference
Tools	a **differentiation toolkit** in the appendix

THINK ABOUT

- Many teachers believe that mixed-ability classes require a different task for every learner. Is this realistic? Aren't all classes mixed-ability classes?
- Apart from level, how do learners in your classes differ from each other?
- What can you do to make sure every learner is challenged, but not overwhelmed?

What is a mixed-ability class?

Every class is mixed. Even learners placed at the same level by a test differ in their skills, their speed, their confidence and their reasons for learning. A class becomes a "mixed-ability class" when these differences are large enough to affect how you plan and teach.

The term **mixed ability** is widely used, but many writers prefer **mixed-level** or **heterogeneous**, because "ability" can suggest something fixed (Ur 2012). Learners who are weaker today can make good progress with the right support. The differences that matter most in practice are:

Difference	What you might notice
Level	some learners understand everything; others struggle with basic instructions
Skills profile	a learner may speak fluently but write poorly, or read well but struggle to listen
Pace	some learners finish quickly; others need much more time
Confidence	some learners volunteer constantly; others rarely speak
Motivation and goals	some need English for work or exams; others are there because they have to be

Other differences, such as age, personality, background and learning preferences, are covered in the **Learning Preferences and Strategies** handout.

Differentiation

Differentiation means adapting teaching so that learners with different needs can all learn successfully (Tomlinson 2014). It doesn't mean planning a separate lesson for each learner. Teachers can vary three things, according to learners' **readiness** (their current level) and their **interests**:

Vary the…	What it means	Example
Content	what learners work on	all learners read the same text, but weaker learners get a glossary of key words
Process	how they work, and with how much support	some learners work with sentence starters; others work without them
Product	what they produce to show their learning	learners write a short paragraph, a longer text or a dialogue, depending on their level

The aim is for every learner to work in their **zone of proximal development**: on tasks that are slightly beyond what they can do alone, with the support they need to succeed (see the **Second Language Acquisition** handout).

Practical strategies

Ur (2012) suggests strategies that work with a whole class, using the same materials.

Strategy	What it means	Example
Open-ended tasks	tasks with many possible answers, so learners respond at their own level	*Write as many sentences as you can about your town.*
Compulsory and optional parts	everyone does a core part; faster learners do more	*Answer at least questions 1–5. If you have time, do 6–8.*
Graded tasks	the same text or activity with tasks at different levels	three sets of questions on one text: simple, standard and challenging
Time limits, not quantity	learners work for a set time rather than to a set number of answers	*Work for five minutes. Start with any question.*
Choice	learners choose tasks, topics or questions	learners choose two of four discussion questions
Personalisation	tasks that let learners talk about themselves	learners use new language to describe their own experiences
Collaboration	learners support and learn from each other	pairs check answers together before feedback
Variety	a range of topics, task types and interaction patterns	alternating individual, pair and whole-class work

Based on Ur (2012) and Tice (1997)

Grouping learners

Should stronger and weaker learners work together, or separately? There is no single answer: it depends on the aim of the activity.

	Same-level pairs and groups	Mixed-level pairs and groups
Useful when…	learners need to work at their own pace; you want to give extra support to one group; stronger learners need more challenge	learners can learn from each other; the task has roles of different difficulty; you want to build a supportive class
Watch out for…	groups being labelled "strong" and "weak"; weaker groups losing motivation	stronger learners doing all the work; weaker learners becoming passive
Tips	change groups regularly; avoid naming groups by level	give each learner a clear role; make stronger learners explain, not just tell

Varying groupings, sometimes by level, sometimes mixed, sometimes random, keeps the class dynamic and avoids fixed labels.

Differentiation in action

A B1 class is reading a coursebook article about a city festival, followed by eight comprehension questions and a discussion. Here are four of the learners:

Learner	Profile
Sofia	weakest in the class (around A2); shy; reads slowly; likes clear, structured exercises
Ratana	B1; good vocabulary but struggles with pronunciation; sociable and enjoys group work
Filip	B1; accurate and confident; motivated by real-life tasks
Mateo	strongest in the class (around B2); finishes quickly and gets bored easily

Instead of replacing the coursebook activities, the teacher adapts them at three levels.

Stage	Support	Core	Challenge
Before reading	a picture glossary of six key words	predict the content from the title and photos	predict, and write two questions the article might answer
Reading	answer questions 1–4; line numbers are given	answer questions 1–8	answer 1–8, then write one extra question for a partner
Speaking	sentence starters (*I'd like to… because…*)	discuss the questions in groups	lead the group discussion and report the group's views

Sofia starts with support but can move on to the core task when she is ready. Mateo takes the challenge options, which keeps him busy and gives him a useful role. Ratana and Filip do the core task, and anyone can try the challenge. Learners choose or are guided to a level, and the levels stay flexible: they are not fixed labels.

Common problems and solutions

Problem	What to do
Half the class finishes long before the others.	Use optional extra parts and open-ended tasks; have a fast-finisher task ready.
Stronger learners get bored when you explain to weaker ones.	Ask stronger learners to explain, or give them a different task while you work with a small group.
Stronger learners dominate.	Use pair work before whole-class discussion; give roles; ask weaker learners questions they can answer.
Weaker learners don't try, or start to disrupt.	Give achievable tasks with support; recognise effort and progress, not just results.
You don't know where to pitch the lesson.	Pitch the core task at the middle of the class, then add support and challenge options.
Weaker learners want everything explained in the L1.	Grade your language; use visuals and examples; teach classroom English; use the L1 with purpose.
Weaker learners try hard but get low marks.	Include effort and progress in assessment; use self-assessment.
Some written work is full of errors.	Focus on a few key errors; use correction codes; encourage self- and peer correction.
A strong learner asks a question you can't answer.	Say you'll find out; use reference books together; treat strong learners as a resource.
Many learners are behind the syllabus.	Identify key gaps; offer extra practice through homework or self-study, without slowing down the whole class.

Adapted from Tice (1997: 77–78)

Making it work

Start small

Add one strategy at a time, such as optional extra questions, and use it regularly until it becomes routine.

Know your learners

Use diagnostic tasks, observation and short questionnaires to find out about learners' levels, skills and interests.

Plan support and challenge

When you plan a task, ask: *What will help learners who struggle? What will stretch those who finish quickly?*

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
Planning a different lesson for every learner.	Adapt the same materials with support and challenge options.
Teaching to the middle and ignoring the rest.	Add support and extension to the core task.
Leaving fast finishers with nothing to do.	Always have an extension task ready.
Always putting the same learners together.	Vary groupings according to the aim of the activity.
Labelling learners by level.	Keep levels flexible and focus on progress.

ONLINE CLASSES

Online, differentiation can be easier to manage. Share tasks at different levels in separate documents, use breakout rooms for same-level groups while you support one of them.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Every class is mixed: the question is how much, and in what ways.
- Differentiation means varying content, process or product, not planning separate lessons.
- Open-ended tasks, optional extras, graded tasks and choice work with the same materials.
- Group learners by level or mixed according to the aim, and vary groupings.
- Keep levels flexible, and recognise effort and progress as well as results.

WHERE NEXT

Large Classes routines and management in big classes

Learning Preferences and Strategies other ways learners differ

Classroom Management grouping, instructions and monitoring

Practice Activities activities that can be adapted to different levels

Further reading

Dudley, E. & Osváth, E. (2016). *Mixed-Ability Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tice, J. (1997). *The Mixed Ability Class*. Richmond Publishing.

Tomlinson, C.A. (2014). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Ur, P. (2012). *A Course in English Language Teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix · Differentiation toolkit

Use this checklist when you plan a lesson for a mixed-ability class. You don't need to tick every box: choose two or three strategies for each lesson.

Before the lesson	
I know which learners may need more support and which need more challenge.	☐
The core task is pitched at the middle of the class.	☐
I have support and challenge options, and an extension task for fast finishers.	☐

Tasks	
At least one task is open-ended.	☐
Some tasks have compulsory and optional parts.	☐
Learners have some choice: of questions, topics or tasks.	☐

During the lesson	
I vary groupings according to the aim of each activity.	☐
Stronger learners have useful roles, not just more work.	☐
I spend time with learners who need support, while others work independently.	☐

Feedback and assessment	
I recognise effort and progress, not just correct answers.	☐
Learners use self- and peer checking.	☐
Feedback focuses on a few key points for each learner.	☐

Quick ideas

Support	Challenge	Fast finishers
glossaries and word banks	extra or harder questions	write questions for a partner
sentence starters and models	explain an answer to a classmate	find examples of the target language in the text
line numbers or highlighted text	add a condition, e.g. use three new words	summarise the text in 20 words
fewer questions or shorter texts	lead a group or report back	check and correct a partner's work