

Teaching in the Multilevel Classroom



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In my role as the national trainer for Pearson Education, I have the privilege of traveling around the country and working with teachers in every type of program - community colleges, adult schools, private language schools, prisons, and community-based programs in libraries and churches. In all of these programs, I have discovered a common question: Is there an easier, more effective way to manage instruction in the multilevel classroom? The response is not as complicated as one might imagine, but it does require an examination of a variety of factors.

What makes an ESL classroom “multilevel”?

The student’s educational background in his/her first language. Students arrive in an ESL classroom with varied educational backgrounds. Some students have had little or no education. Others have completed the equivalent of our junior high or high school, while still others have attended trade school, college or university, and even doctorate programs. As literacy is tied to educational background, students in the same ESL classroom can range from illiterate/low-literate to high academic proficiency.

The student’s comfort with the Roman alphabet. Literacy proficiency not only applies to reading and writing in one’s first language, but also to an ESL student’s familiarity with the Roman alphabet. While Chinese, Korean, Egyptian, or Persian students may be highly literate in their native languages, they must learn new alphabet characters when learning English. The challenge of learning a new set of alphabet characters can affect a student’s ability to participate optimally in the ESL classroom.

The cultural expectations each student has regarding the role of the teacher. Students from outside the United States may have different expectations for the

classroom. Many countries, for example, still conduct classes that are 100 percent teacher directed, (i.e., the students sit and listen while the teacher instructs). Students with this kind of educational background may not feel comfortable participating in a communicative ESL classroom. The students may even think the teacher is “bad” for requiring them to ask questions, participate in classroom games and activities, work with partners or in small groups, or self- or peer-correct their assignments.

The student’s personality. A student’s individual personality is another factor that affects instruction. Personality plays a huge role in a student’s willingness to participate in activities, take risks using English, and become part of the larger classroom community.

The student’s goals. Research on student persistence is clear that the more specific a student’s goal(s), the more motivated that student is to attend class. Students, for example, who are coming to learn English so they can help their children with their homework, or so they can get a better job, will be more motivated to come to class than those who are coming simply “to learn English.”

The student’s age. Most ESL classes are made up of adults ranging in age from 18 to 80 or more. Generally speaking, the older the student, the more challenging it will be for the student to retain information. Personality and motivation, however, tend to have a greater impact on acquisition than age.

The student’s learning style. A teacher must be cognizant of the three learning styles - audio, visual, and tactile - and ensure that classroom instruction and activities accommodate these different styles of learning. Of course, a good student book and teacher’s edition does this automatically.

The student's status in United States culture. A student's personal situation can also contribute to a multilevel classroom environment. Has the student come to the United States as a refugee? Is he or she here alone or with a larger group of friends or family? Is the student poor? Middle class? Quite wealthy? Does the student have legal status, or is he or she undocumented?

The student's access to English outside the ESL classroom.

Finally, the number of opportunities students have to use English outside the classroom can impact instruction. While some students may live in a closed community where everyone everywhere speaks their first language, others do not and must use English to communicate in everyday situations and/or at work. Of course, the more language learners use English in their everyday lives, the more quickly their acquisition and proficiency improves.

Levels of Proficiency in the Multilevel Classroom

When planning instruction for a multilevel class, teachers must first consider the varied proficiency levels of their students. In general, many students perform at the same or similar level; however, there are always students who perform "below" level and others who perform "above" level.

Below-level. These students are struggling to keep up with instruction. They need extra time to complete activities and are often dependent on peer support to be successful. These students may have feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem and are usually very cognizant of the fact that everyone else in class is learning more rapidly than they are. Below-level students are at risk because they often become frustrated and blame themselves for their inability to learn more efficiently.

At-level. These students are doing well with their current level of instruction and are progressing as they should.

Above-level. These students may have more language proficiency than the at-level students, or these students may be able to "get it" more quickly than their classmates. Above-level students are at risk because they can become frustrated with the teacher for not providing more challenging lessons. They can also become bored or disruptive while waiting for the other students to "catch up."

The four language skills. A discussion of levels of proficiency cannot be complete without first addressing that a student's abilities in each of the four language skills - reading, writing, speaking, and listening - may also be at varying levels. The same student can be an above-level speaker, an at-level listener, an at-level reader, and a below-level writer. A teacher must be cognizant of each student's strengths and weaknesses during instruction and when assigning tasks.

Grouping Strategies in the Multilevel Classroom

Managing a classroom of students at these different learning levels can present a challenge for instructors; however, according to a CALPRO article on managing the multilevel classroom, "The use of grouping strategies has been found to be an effective management

tool in multilevel settings to provide efficient use of teacher and student time. Students can assist each other, which frees the teacher to work with individuals or small groups."

There are four ways to group students:

- Pair work (two students working together)
- Group work (three to ten students working together)
- Teamwork (teams of students working together in competition with other teams)
- Whole-class work (the entire class participating in an activity)

The role of the ESL teacher is not only to deliver instruction, but also to orchestrate the pairing, grouping, and teaming-up of students. In the multilevel classroom, this process is especially critical for the below-level and above-level students.

Students can be paired and grouped as either "like-ability" or "cross-ability." Like-ability is where students of the *same* proficiency level work together. The benefit of like-ability matching is that similar needs of the students can be addressed. Cross-ability is where students of *different* proficiency levels work together. The benefit of cross-ability matching is that the higher-level students can help the lower-level students.

Teamwork is always a cross-ability grouping (it would be difficult for below-level teams to ever win), as is whole-class work, by its very nature. With pair work and group work, however, teachers can decide, based upon the task, whether to match students by like-ability or cross-ability, as well as who to match with whom. A side benefit of ongoing and varied matching is the building of a strong, vibrant, comfortable, safe learning environment and classroom community.

Multilevel Instructional Strategies

There was a time when a popular model for multilevel instruction required the teacher to choose a topic and then develop different lessons with different objectives for the different proficiency levels in his/her classroom. The teacher moved from group to group, in effect, managing a three-ring circus. The lesson planning was overwhelming and exhausting, often requiring the teacher to develop his/her own curriculum and handouts.

Today there is more support for the multilevel instructor, including teacher's editions and ready-made reproducibles, which can be easily adapted to multilevel instruction. Instead of creating different lessons with different objectives for the different proficiency levels, teachers can "teach to the middle" and then assign different, appropriately leveled tasks.

Lesson Planning

Begin the lesson with the whole class together

Beginning the lesson with the whole class together provides a foundation for the leveled tasks that will follow. Throughout the preview and present portion of the lesson, the teacher intermittently lowers and raises instruction to keep the below-level and above-level students interested. Since most lessons in

beginning-level ESL classes begin with learning the vocabulary that will be used in the unit, it is easy to start a lesson with the whole class together. The natural process of previewing, presenting, and practicing the vocabulary lends itself perfectly to whole-class, multilevel instruction.

Assign leveled tasks using a variety of groupings

During the practice and evaluation stages of the lesson, students' tasks are leveled according to proficiency and language skill. If the objective, for example, is to complete an order form "from a mail-order catalog company, a student can learn skills of following written instructions, filling out forms, and doing various math operations" (Cowels, 1997). The leveled tasks "can be varied to suit the skill levels and interests of the learner: one person might order a single item, like a hat, while another might take on the very challenging task of measuring windows and ordering curtains of the correct size" (Cowels, 1997). It is helpful to have a teacher's edition, which provides a variety of expansion activities for each lesson. These expansion activities can be invaluable resources from which to choose specific tasks to assign to different-leveled groups. In the discussion that follows, we will look more closely at how to use both the student's book and the teacher's edition to do this.

End the lesson with the whole class together

In the application stage of your lesson, bring the whole class back together for review and to assign a whole-class activity.

Using Your Core Text to Develop Leveled Tasks

It is easy to level different types of activities using the student book. This section looks at leveling conversation exercises, writing and dictation activities, and listening tasks.

Leveling conversations

The typical conversation taught in a multilevel environment might look something like this:

A. I'm going to the supermarket. What do we need?

B. Please get some _____.

A. _____? All right. Anything else?

B. Yes. We can probably use some _____ and some _____.

A. _____ and _____? Sure. No problem!

Teach the entire conversation to the whole class by using parroting techniques. Then have students practice in like-ability pairs. The below-level pairs practice only the first part:

A. I'm going to the supermarket. What do we need?

B. Please get some _____.

Have the at-level pairs practice the whole conversation.

Have the above-level pairs practice the whole conversation, plus come up with five different responses that can replace "Sure. No problem!" For example, "Okay, I'll see you later," or "All right. Can I have some money?" Or, "Sure, honey bunny. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Leveling writing activities

Students in beginning-level multilevel classrooms need and want the opportunity to practice writing. Writing is a skill that is often challenging enough in the writer's first language, let alone the second language. For students who have a limited vocabulary and understanding of grammar, trying to organize sentences can be frustrating and unproductive. Writing activities must be meaningful and useful in the students' English-speaking world. Tasks such as completing an application or personal information form, writing an absence note (for the student's own ESL class or for his/her child's class), writing an e-mail or postcard to loved ones outside the United States, or writing a request for vacation time from an employer, are ones that students will encounter in their personal lives.

Writing tasks should start with a model and provide students with clear instructions on how to "swap out" the information on the model with their own. To ensure my beginning-level students were successful with the activity, I used different-colored markers on a white board or overhead, so the students were clear on where to put their own information. Even with modeling, however, sometimes several drafts had to be completed before a paper was perfect.

Writing activities can be completed as a whole class or with students paired in cross-ability groups. As the higher-level students complete their tasks, they can work alongside the students who require additional support.

Leveling dictation activities

In every level I have taught, from literacy to advanced, students have always asked for more dictation. I normally did dictation at the end of class because I wanted my students to have time to go home and self-correct their writing. I might dictate from a dialogue we had just practiced, giving the below-level students the option of keeping their books open. Or I might dictate from a vocabulary list, and the below-level students would write only the vocabulary word, while the at-level and above-level students would write the whole sentence. So, the students might hear, "apples, apples, apples. Please get some apples at the store." The below-level students would simply write, "apples," while the at- and above-level students would write, "Please get some apples at the store," and underline the word "apples."

The following morning, as students would arrive at class, each would write one vocabulary word or sentence from a list on the board. When all the sentences were written, we would correct them on the board as a whole class, while individual students self-corrected their own papers.

Listening strategies

Because I found listening activities to be difficult for students at all levels, I implemented a step-by-step strategy. I explained to the students that if they followed all the steps, they would be successful with the activity. The strategy went like this:

- First, review with the class the task to be completed after the listening activity

- Second, students listen to the audio recording with their eyes closed
- Third, students listen again, looking at the task to be completed
- Next, students listen again and complete the task
- Next, students listen again and review their work
- Next, students compare their answers with their partner's answers
- Finally, listen again and stop the audio to review each answer as a class

Using Your Teacher's Edition to Develop Levelled Tasks

The most important component of a beginning-level ESL curriculum is the teacher's edition of your classroom textbook. How much additional support does your teacher's edition provide? A good teacher's edition will contain many suggestions, and even additional resources and worksheets, that expand on the core lesson. Your teacher's edition, for example, might contain a set of concentration cards for the low-level students to use (with or without their books open), while the at-level students participate in a chain story, and the above-level students discuss a controversial topic and write a paragraph about their conclusions, which they read to the whole class.

Choosing which expansion activity to assign to each level requires familiarity with each student's language skills. The goal is to get each level of students to complete the assigned tasks at the same time.

Open-Entry/Open-Exit Multilevel Classrooms Management

In addition to negotiating the challenges of multilevel instruction, a significant percentage of programs participate in open-entry/open-exit enrollment. The easiest and most effective way to manage the ongoing influx of new students is for the teacher to organize a "welcome team" (generally, with the above-level students). When a new student enters the classroom after the start of the semester, the welcome team pairs the new student with a buddy who speaks his/her first language. The buddy gets the new student settled in, and the new student is then immediately connected to the classroom community.

Summary

There are several ways to keep your head above water when teaching in a multilevel classroom. First, find a curriculum with a teacher's edition that provides various tasks that can be adapted to a variety of levels and groupings. Second, attend workshops at your local, state, and national levels. Third, hoard any and all reproducibles you can get your hands on. Finally, keep up with ESL websites such as Dave's ESL Café, the Internet TESOL Journal, and Focus on Basics. Get comfortable with searching the internet for ESL and multilevel instruction sites. There is a wealth of information on the internet, including lesson plans and downloadable reproducibles.

Teaching in the multilevel classroom is both challenging and rewarding. No matter how well you prepare for the day's lessons, once you start teaching, the proverbial curve ball may come once, twice, or even a dozen times before the end of the class session. What keeps the dedicated teacher moving forward with staunch resolve is the determination that all the wonderful students in his/her class will feel that they learned something, that their confidence was sustained or uplifted, and that everyone is looking forward to the next lesson.

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