



DANIEL BRAYSHAW
Author and Teacher Trainer

REAL CHALLENGES REAL SOLUTIONS *Hand in Hand* WITH TEACHERS

MIXED-ABILITIES

All classes are made up of learners who differ in many ways i.e. maturity and language ability. Here are some of the key challenges teachers face in mixed ability classes together with a range of practical solutions:

1 CHALLENGE 1: Differing levels of maturity among students

Sometimes immaturity is mistaken for a lack of ability.

SOLUTIONS

- Discuss **expectations** and appropriate behaviour.
- Negotiate and agree **classroom rules**.

2 CHALLENGE 2: Varied language ability

Varied language ability in terms of:

- **proficiency** - how much language a student is able to understand and use at any given point,
- **aptitude** - language-learning ability.

SOLUTIONS

- Be **flexible** in terms of methodology and appeal to a variety of learning styles and abilities.
- Provide **variety** in terms of difficulty, length, skills-focus, pace, interaction patterns etc.
- Get students **sharing** their ideas on learning strategies.

3 CHALLENGE 3: Classroom management with mixed ability groups

Lockstep teaching describes a situation in which all students in a class are engaged in the same activity at the same time, all progressing through tasks at the same rate.

SOLUTIONS

- Ensure there is a **wide variety of activity types** and levels of challenge.
- Provide **extra activities** for early finishers.
- **Pair up** more-able students with less-able ones.

4 CHALLENGE 4: Differentiating input and practice according to students' abilities

Allowing students to have some influence on the lesson and the learning process. Students can become disengaged if they feel their ideas and input to the lesson are being ignored.

SOLUTIONS

Step 1: Begin the lesson in lockstep with everyone completing a warm up activity together.

Step 2: Split the group. Less-able students stay with the teacher for a presentation on the target language, and more-able students use MyLab or similar online materials and do a receptive activity.

Step 3: Come back to lockstep and complete a controlled practice activity together as a group.

Step 4: Split again. More-able students go back to MyLab for more autonomous controlled practice at their level, while less-able students complete further controlled practice with teacher's support.

Step 5: Come back to lockstep for the final part of the lesson and complete a freer practice activity together.

REMEMBER: Students differ in many ways and the diversity in our classrooms brings challenges but also opportunities. With a bit of planning and very little extra preparation, it is possible to differentiate input and practice in mixed ability classes to ensure that everyone has a satisfying and successful learning experience.