

# TEACHING MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES



A(1) Know how students learn

C(3) Promote quality and equity in education for all students

Mixed level and mixed ability classes are a common challenge for many teachers. With the right techniques all students can be challenged and can find success in your class.

## Students in mixed-ability classes can vary based on their:

- Age or maturity
- Previous experience with the subject content
- Language level and mother tongue
- Confidence and independence
- Motivation or attitude towards the subject
- Cultural background

It takes time and assessment to understand students' individual learning styles, language needs, motivations and abilities. Once you begin to understand students' different abilities, you can intentionally plan lessons to incorporate all student needs.

Below are some activities and strategies to keep all students engaged and participating while being mindful of their different abilities.

## LIST OF GROUPING STRATEGIES

### INTEREST GROUPING

Let students choose their groups based on their interests. Interest grouping can be a way to motivate students and engage them in learning. Use this for project work to encourage more interaction.



### SIMILAR ABILITY GROUPING

Divide the class into groups based on ability. Have stronger students in one group and weaker students into another. This type of grouping is used to allow students to work at their own pace. This will allow you to give extra challenges to the stronger group and more support to the weaker group.



## GENDER GROUPING

Student grouping should be intentional. Sometimes grouping the students based on gender might make some students feel more comfortable and therefore it may be easier for them to express their ideas.



## MIXED ABILITY PAIRS

Intentionally pair a strong student with a student who is struggling for an activity or review exercise. Circulate to check that the strong students don't always dominate the discussion. Give each person a role or responsibility and have them switch during the activity.



## LIST OF STRATEGIES

## SET CLASSWIDE GOALS

Share a goal for the class that includes all students.

### For example:

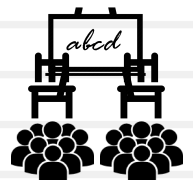
"I will consider this activity completed when all students have answered all 3 questions to the best of their ability." This way, advanced students will know that if they finish, they need to support other students for the class to reach its goal.



## THE HOT SEAT

This activity is especially useful when teaching new vocabulary. Divide the class into two groups. Each group places one chair, the "hot seat," facing away from the board. Have one volunteer from each group come and sit in the hot seat facing their group.

Write a new vocabulary word or phrase on the board. Have the members of each group ask questions or explain to their teammate about the word or phrase. The first to say it wins! The only rule is that no one can use the vocabulary words written on the board.



## RAMP UP

Begin your lesson with easier review questions to build students' confidence. If you have students with lower ability, this is a great chance to allow them to answer and boost confidence.

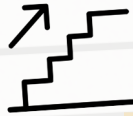
As the lesson continues, begin to ask more challenging questions and choose specific students to answer. If someone makes a mistake use it as a learning opportunity.

For example: Grade 5, Math

First step :  $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} = ?$

Second step :  $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} = ?$

Third step :  $1\frac{1}{2} + 2\frac{1}{2} = ?$



## VARY THE TASK

After teaching the new content of a lesson, vary the practice activity based on students' individual levels.

### For example:

If you have a student finish their work before the others:

- Give them an extra task that challenges them
- Give different types (or amounts) of homework
- Ask them to assist a struggling student to keep them challenged



## DONUT METHOD

Make two groups. Have each group stand in a circle: one inside and one outside. Have students from each group face each other. Ask a question for each pair to discuss and answer. For the next question, have one circle rotate so students work with different partners for each question.



## KWL (KNOW, WANT, LEARNED)

This is a strategy to use continuously throughout your lesson.

Write the new topic on the board and begin by asking students what they already **Know** about the topic. This will give you valuable information about students' prior learning.

Next, ask students what they **Want** to know about the topic. What questions do they have?

At the end of the lesson, ask students to write down what they have **Learned**. This will tell you what they remember, and what you will need to reteach next lesson.

K	W	L

## MIND MAP

Have students work on a team to create a mind map. Make a rule that everyone needs to contribute at least one idea. This way all students get to participate and share without having to take a risk in front of the whole class.



## STATIONS

Put students in small groups. In each corner of the room make a station with a specific question or task. Have groups move around to the different stations to answer all the questions. As they are working, use this time to move around to check if struggling students understand or are having difficulty.



## GUIDE THE WAY FOR ANSWER

- When giving time taking questions and difficult riddles to solve to the students who are slow learners and under-confidence, the teacher can monitor them closely to guide to the answer.
- Let them share their correct answers to the class.
- Praise them for getting the correct answers. (This can improve their confidence.)

### For example:

The teacher gives a math problem to the students. Check on the weak students often and give the instructions that guide to the correct answers. Let them share with the class when they get the correct answer.



## PREPARING FOR THE POSSIBLE CHALLENGES

Think about potential challenges students may struggle with when making your lesson plan. Once you have brainstormed a list of challenges, think of ways your lesson can overcome those challenges (thinking about the specific needs of your students)

### For example:

Think about the questions students might ask or topics that may need more explanation or an activity to illustrate.

Think about how you can involve all students every activity. Especially think about students who may have a disability – what considerations are needed for them to actively participate?

Think about creating emotionally-safe activities for children lacking confidence.



## TEACHER TALK

It's important to reflect on both what and how you speak and give feedback to students.

Below are a few key points related to the choice of language you use in the classroom.

Small changes in your choice of language make a big difference.

### CLARITY

Always give simple, clear and easy-to-follow instructions so that all students can be successful. Use hand gestures as well as words to explain the task. To make sure students understand the task, call on stronger students to give examples or explain using their own words.



### ERROR CORRECTION

Stronger students often want more detailed correction that challenges them. However, over correcting weak students can affect their confidence. Allow students to correct one another with the aim of a higher accuracy level.



### CULTURE OF ERROR

It is essential to create supportive environment in the classroom to increase students' confidence and performance. Use a friendly, encouraging and respectful attitude towards students and exercise more patience with students who are struggling.



### MLE (MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION)

In a mixed language class, if you can speak or write the different languages students use, check if students understand using their mother tongue language. Use different languages to repeat or clarify instructions.



### STUDENT SELECTION

Students take a risk each time they publicly answer a question in front of their peers. Think carefully about who you choose to answer each question as you don't want to embarrass or shame anyone.



### COACH INDIVIDUALLY

It's important to give extra time to support struggling students. When students are working on questions individually, make sure to circulate to students you know will need extra help. This is critical to help them succeed.



## COMMUNICATION OUTSIDE THE CLASS

If you have a student who is particularly shy or a student who you suspect is struggling with issues outside of school, invite them to briefly talk with you after the class is finished. This way you can check if they need extra help and provide them with a safe, quiet time to talk.



## TEACH WHY

Teach the students to know WHY instead of just WHAT.

When students understand the bigger picture, they will actually understand the new concept, not just memorize it.

**For example:** Grade 7, Geography  
To help students fully understand weather patterns, intentionally ask students “What causes the seasons to change?”



## ASSESSMENT FOR A MIXED ABILITY CLASS

Assessment can be stressful if your students have diverse abilities.

Below are some assessments that involve students working together.

This can be a good strategy to intentionally have students help each other.

## SUPPORT GROUPS

Have students work on questions individually, then come together in small support groups to discuss their answers. Once the groups have checked their answers together, have a class discussion.



## PAIR QUIZ

Give students a quiz to complete in pairs to assess your lesson. You will have to circulate to make sure one student isn't doing all the work.

