

The Top 5 Ways to Teach Different Levels of ESL Students in the Same Class

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Not to worry, you don't have to clone yourself to be able to navigate this difficult situation! Even in a less-than-ideal mix of students, you can still find ways to engage them all. Don't worry about planning a "perfect" lesson; just do the best you can.

1. Use strategic seating

Since you can't be everywhere at once, have your students help one another by placing them in an effective seating arrangement.

a. Buddy system

Seat the advanced student next to the beginner. This way, the advanced student will be able to help the beginner. By forming these pairs, you'll be able to include more challenging material in each lesson because your students can help each other. The advanced student will learn more too by having to explain what they know to the beginner. If you have some students who are at an intermediate level, seat them together. You can't individually help each student throughout the lesson, but your students can help each other so that everyone understands the material.

b. Mixed-level groups

You could also place students in a small group of four or five. In each group, you can have at least one advanced student and at least one beginner. By mixing the levels in these groups, students will be able to rely upon each other. This is especially effective in a large class. Students can ask members of their group questions and try to solve problems together. You can then divide your time between five or six groups rather than trying to bounce around and help 30+ students.

c. Same-level groups

You can divide your students into groups by their English level. You could simply do beginner, intermediate or advanced based on your initial interaction with your students or the quality of their first few assignments. But same-level groups will help you to address the same level of student all at once, which will allow you to give level-specific assignments.

2. Provide multiple levels of each activity

Even if you're teaching from a specific book or workbook, there are always ways to expand an assignment to challenge the students who need it.

a. Beginner

Start any assignment with the lowest level student in mind. If your class includes a few students who don't know any English, then make sure your assignment starts at a beginner level so that they can learn the basics. Perhaps your book has a lesson on basic conversation. This is useful information that every English speaker must know. They have to know "hello" and "goodbye" before they can discuss business negotiations! Don't skip these basics just because some students will be bored; instead, expand these basics for those at a higher level.

b. Intermediate

After covering the basics, make the assignment a bit more difficult for students at the next level. Any student who already knows basic conversation can do something more challenging than the original assignment. Teach them a few colloquialisms to complement the basics. Have them write down at least 3 ways of saying any

basic conversational term. For example, “How are you?” can also be “How’s it going?” or “What’s up?” or “What’s going on?” or “What’s new?”

c. Advanced

To challenge this group, you can make the assignment even harder. If they already know basic conversation and colloquialisms, have them write a conversational script for a certain scenario that you will give them. For example, you could have two advanced students write a script that shows business colleagues greeting one another and making small talk outside of work. This will challenge them and teach them a specific conversational tone. You could even have them perform the skit for you to practice their pronunciation! By taking one assignment and adding onto it, you can ensure that the basics are taught and more advanced students are appropriately challenged.

3. Teach the same concept several ways

This is important in any class because there are many types of learning styles. But this is especially important in a multi-level class so that no one is left behind.

a. Tell

You can start your lesson by giving the information verbally. Even if you have students who don’t understand much English, it is helpful for them to get used to hearing the English. They’ll gradually be able to pick out words and understand sentences. If you know your class has beginners, make sure to speak very slowly and to pick out important terms. For example, if they don’t understand very much, you can repeat a key word a few times and have them say it too. Maybe you said the sentence, “I want you to finish this for homework” and you want them to become familiar with the word “homework.” Repeat this word as you say the sentence and make sure they know its meaning by motioning to the worksheet or acting it out. Both beginners and advanced students can benefit from hearing you speak.

b. Write

A chalkboard, dry-erase board or overhead projector is very important because it will allow students to see the lesson. Some students simply learn more visually. This is useful for both beginners and advanced students. Beginners need to become familiar with spelling, and while they might struggle to understand what you’re saying, seeing the word will allow them to learn it. But this will also help advanced students, especially those who have learned English by speaking it at home, but have not learned proper spellings. A beginner might need to see the word “homework” so that they can look it up in the dictionary and memorize it. An advanced student might need to see the word “homework” because while they know the word, they might be inclined to spell it as “homwirk!” English spelling is difficult to learn, so it will help all levels of learners to see and write the words.

c. Show

You can use visual aids to help your students or even have your students show something by acting it out! For example, if you’re teaching sports, you could bring in some different equipment from each sport like a soccer ball, basketball, baseball, football and tennis ball. By showing the equipment when saying the word, beginners will be able to understand it. You could quiz your class by holding up a ball and having them name the sport so that your advanced students can practice their pronunciation. You could even have students act out the sports and guess which one it is. This encourages student participation and makes the lesson more meaningful to all levels.

4. Play games

Games are a great way to involve all levels of English learners. Even a game geared towards beginners can give advanced students a chance to practice speaking and listening. Plus, all students are more likely to learn when they're having fun!

a. Pick teams

Choose teams strategically. Make sure that one team doesn't have all of the advanced students while another team has mostly beginners. Everyone will be challenged and included when the teams are mixed. You could let students choose teams too by selecting team captains and having them alternate picking teammates. The teams will likely be mixed because advanced students will probably be chosen first and then beginners, so each team will get some of each level of student.

b. Active participation

Games help students learn by requiring active participation. You could even offer an award for the winners. This will encourage a competitive spirit so that everyone is motivated to participate. It's this participation that is helpful to all levels of English learners. Choose a game that requires speaking so that students get to practice, such as "I Spy" if you're teaching colors. To get more participation, you can choose games that can be played in pairs or small groups, such as "Twenty Questions," so that each student is sure to get a turn.

c. Have fun

When you choose a game that your students enjoy, even if it isn't the most challenging for your advanced students, they'll still have fun and practice English. Enjoyment is a powerful motivator for learning! The chance to do something different will make your students want to practice English. It is this practice that will make all levels of learners more comfortable with new vocabulary and grammatical constructs.

5. Give personal attention

While students are working on an assignment, make sure to go around and interact with your students. Take a look at their work to make sure the beginners are understanding it, and use the opportunity to challenge more advanced students.

a. Reach out to beginners

These students will need the most help! Make them a priority when going around the room. While your communication may be limited, take a look at their assignment and see if they're understanding it. If not, go over the information with them again and try to show them what you're looking for. If several beginners are struggling, do a few exercises with them. This will help you to make sure that no one is lost.

b. Challenge advanced students

Once you're confident that your beginners understand the assignment, visit the more advanced students and try to challenge them further. You can ask them some harder questions or ask them why they chose a specific answer or give them another scenario to try. If they're breezing through an assignment, you can give them a special challenge question for when they have finished. You can even have them ask you something that they're unsure about and give them an extra assignment about that topic. This will help ensure that no one is bored.

c. Give additional opportunities

You can only do so much during one class period. If you get the sense that some students are still either lost or bored, offer to help them classroom after class. Besides helping with your current lesson, you could do some special activities like going over the lyrics to popular music or watching a TV show with subtitles.