

Heterogeneous (mixed-level) classes

A well-known half-joking definition of a heterogeneous class is ‘a class of two’: as soon as you have more than one student, you have heterogeneity. You always need to cope with different people among any student group. So these tips are applicable to virtually all classes.

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38 Let students choose

Whenever you can, allow students some choice in the items they want to answer in a language exercise, so they can opt for those that are closer to their level or interests.

Textbooks don’t usually allow for student choice in exercises. They usually just give directions like *Match ...* or *Complete ...*. You can introduce an element of choice by using one of the following strategies:

- Start where you like. Read through (without answering) a set of question items, then tell students they can raise their hands to answer any of the items they like. So one student who wants to respond to a more challenging item that happens to be question 7, or another who wants to answer an easier one that is question 10 – can do so immediately. The same can be done if the students are writing down their answers.
- Do any six of the questions. (Or five, or three, or whatever.) This works best for written work. The principle is the same as the above. Make sure the exercise is understood by all the class, and then tell them to choose which questions they want to answer and which they don’t.
- Work cards. (My favourite, I must have done this one hundreds of times.) Compose or adapt from a textbook or website ten or fifteen brief ‘bite-sized’ tasks each of which will take only short time to do. Put each on a card or separate slip of paper; you’ll probably need two or three copies of each. Put these at a central point in the classroom, perhaps on your desk. Each student chooses a slip, writes his or her responses in a notebook, and then brings it back and chooses another. Make sure students know they aren’t allowed to write on the original slips! If you think you’ll use the slips again, then paste them onto card and laminate them.

Attend to the weaker students **39**

It’s normally the stronger and more confident students who are the more active participants in the classroom process, and therefore tend to be the ones that get attended to by the teacher.

It’s also, to be honest, easier and more enjoyable to deal with students who get it right and can express themselves fluently and with fewer mistakes. It’s much less comfortable to interact with those who misunderstand, are hesitant, who constantly make errors. And yet these are the ones who need us most, and for whom our teaching can make more of a difference.

So the bottom line is that in a heterogeneous class we need to try, as far as we can, to give most of our attention to students who are under-achieving.

It’s quite difficult to do this in a full-class interaction, where the more advanced students quickly raise their hands in response to your questions, or even shout out answers. So first of all do insist that students wait to be nominated before answering (unless you’re deliberately using a rapid brainstorm interaction like that suggested at the end of Tip 24). And it’s a good idea to allow quite a lot of wait-time before eliciting answers, to give slower students more of a chance to make a contribution. Try telling students that you won’t choose anyone to answer until you see at least ten hands raised. Then when choosing who is to answer, prioritize those who volunteer less often.

In individual work, it’s easier. While the students are working on individual reading or writing tasks (perhaps allowing for some choice, as suggested in Tips 38 and 40), find time to sit by those who find it more difficult, and offer help and support. This can, of course, be done in small groups: gather three or four of such students together in a corner of the classroom, and work with them privately for a few minutes.

40 Invite different answers

It’s important to use mostly open-ended questions or cues in heterogeneous classes: ones that allow for a variety of answers.

Closed-ended questions – those that have only one right answer – are by their very nature homogeneous. They are designed for one level of learner. Students below that level will find them too difficult and either not do them at all or get them wrong. Those who are above the level will answer them easily but won’t benefit much and will quickly get bored.

It’s fairly easy to make closed-ended items into open-ended ones. To practise modals, for example, you might have a closed-ended item like *Jenny is a baby, Jenny _____ ride a bicycle* with the options *can/can’t*: the answer is obviously *can’t*. But if you then say ‘Jenny can’t ride a bicycle, tell me some other things she can or can’t do’ – then the exercise invites all sorts of answers based on *can/can’t* at different levels. A less advanced student might say ‘She can’t walk’ or ‘She can smile’; a more advanced one might say ‘She can crawl’ or ‘She can’t open a bank account’. Make sure that there’s a possibility of making very simple responses, for the less advanced students. The more advanced ones will always find more complex ones.

Another advantage of such items is that they lend themselves to personalization. When I do the exercise described above, for example, students have told me later that they found themselves basing their answers on a particular baby they know (a baby sister, for example).

One of the problems with so-called ‘interactive’ computer-based language exercises, incidentally, is that they are nearly always closed-ended (so that the computer can tell you if you’re right or wrong). They provide useful drilling, but aren’t very suitable for a heterogeneous group of students.

(For more ideas how to transform closed-ended into open-ended exercises, see Tip 9.)