



Finding the learning opportunities

Gareth Davies

shows how to maintain the challenge for fast finishers.

Mixed ability classes are a fact of life. We know as teachers that learning doesn't take place in lockstep: some students learn faster, some slower, some gradually, some in spurts. Some can do the grammar but can't speak, while some can speak nonstop but make loads of errors. Others know all the words but can't spell. Similarly, some students learn what we teach them, and some learn what they hear while gaming or scrolling TikTok. As well as ability, we also have a range of backgrounds, previous learning experiences and expectations – from those who want games and projects to those who just want to study grammar. I am sure you recognise all of this in your own classrooms, and our job is to keep everyone happy, learning and on the same page. What's that saying about keeping the plates spinning?

Problems with traditional mixed-ability solutions

I've always had a problem with traditional mixed-ability solutions. For example, creating different worksheets for different students is not only extra work for me but

feedback to the activities is also tough, because people have been doing different things. Also, different tasks mean that you are creating a two-tier classroom, not good for developing a classroom community, the importance of which I've discussed elsewhere (*Modern English Teacher* 34.2 p.64). Another traditional mixed-ability solution is pairing a weak student with a strong student, but this can create frustrations on both sides. The weak student might feel that the stronger one is dominating and stealing their opportunities to learn, whereas the stronger one might feel frustrated by a lack of progress or feel that they are doing the lion's share of the work while others get the credit. The solution I have settled on is having all the students in the classroom doing the same task but asking them to do it at the best of their abilities and having different expectations of them. In other words, not differentiated tasks but differentiated outcomes.

Different expectations

For example, when doing a gap-fill activity, instead of saying do all ten, I'd give a time limit, for example, do as many as you can in three minutes. The weaker students might do seven, the stronger all ten. In feedback, I could display the answers on the whiteboard, or I ask the weaker students for the answers to the first few questions and the stronger students for

answers to the last few. This also works well with brainstorming activities; instead of saying write four questions or come up with 10 words ask the students how many they can create within the allotted time. Another way of varying expectations might be when we are doing a project. Here I might group my stronger students together but quietly remind them that I expect more in terms of language, while I might allow the weaker ones to be more concerned with the design. It is not perfect, but it works for me and doesn't make some students feel that they are in a lower 'set' and it keeps the whole class feeling like they are all part of the same process.

Challenging stronger learners

Although this approach works quite well, it doesn't fully address the problem of how to keep the stronger ones challenged and motivated when they constantly find things easy. Recently, I had two students who I dubbed my 'super duo', probably two of the strongest students I have ever taught. They were borderline C2 in a C1 class with a C1 coursebook, their classmates were just starting their advanced-level journey. After the first couple of weeks, the 'super duo' came to see me to tell me they weren't feeling challenged or learning anything new. This made me think about what being challenged means. Challenge occurs when you don't know something and need to learn it, or when you know

something but keep making mistakes and want to stop. But what happens when students know something and don't make mistakes? The question then for the student is, if this is known to me, how can I use it to improve? Where are my learning opportunities? The rest of this article is an account of how I tried to use my principle of differentiated outcomes to help these two students notice their learning opportunities and feel challenged without me creating a two-tier classroom.

Noticing learning opportunities

The first thing I noticed with my super duo was that although they galloped through the coursebook material making very few mistakes, when we did productive tasks (projects, discussions, writing tasks) their English was not noticeably better than the other students. It's true they didn't make as many mistakes as the others, but they didn't use more complicated structures either. In other words, they were not putting their knowledge into action. Therefore, I challenged them to find opportunities to activate their knowledge. I told them to note when they used the vocabulary or grammar from the unit or, because there were two of them, to monitor each other and notice when the other one used it. This meant they were challenged to stop playing it safe and take a few more risks, but they were still fundamentally doing the same task as the other students.

When it came to reading, it was almost as if the pair of them inhaled the reading texts since they read them so fast. This meant they were often sitting around waiting for others to catch up. My first idea was borrowed from the methodology for using graded readers, namely, asking them to create a 'my words' page in their notebook and jotting down interesting words or phrases from the texts that they would like to use in their everyday speech. I later extended this to encouraging them to write 'found poems' from interesting phrases in the text. (A found poem is a poem created by taking words or phrases from a text and moulding them into a coherent form and creating new meaning.)

Another idea with texts was to ask them to imagine who the author might be and what biases there are, thus looking at the text more carefully and analytically while completing the same tasks as the

“ The solution I have settled on is having all the students in the classroom doing the same task but asking them to do it at the best of their abilities and having different expectations of them. ”

other students. Sometimes when they had finished early, I ask them to write short summaries of the text with the original hidden, a kind of reading version of a dictogloss. When doing this, I encouraged them to use synonyms where possible to create the same meaning. A final idea for reading texts was asking them to come up with new questions about the text and we used these as class discussion questions once the others had finished. These extra activities were beneficial for the super duo but didn't intrude too much on the core class activity.

Controlled practice was another area where these two students would often finish way before the others. One solution was to give them the Teacher's book and ask them to check their answers. Then when it was time for feedback, I would ask them to lead it; nominating the students and saying if they were right or wrong. Another solution was for them to work out why an answer was right using the grammar reference. Then, during the feedback, I could nominate one student to give the answer and nominate one of my super duo to tell the class why it was right.

Conclusion

These two students liked working together, mostly because they found working with others quite frustrating. As I said above, this works for me as I could expect more from them, but it also doesn't work because it doesn't lead to an integrated, inclusive

classroom. So, there would be times when I wanted them to work with other students. For this, I reminded them of a quote attributed to Einstein – if you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you don't understand it yourself. I asked them to be more like Einstein. I reminded them that helping others showed that they understood things or maybe showed them that they didn't understand as well as they thought they did. Thus, their differentiated outcomes when they were working with less proficient students was to act as mentor and guide to those students. I think it is important to remind stronger students that everyone brings something to the table and even if that isn't language skills, it still might be valuable. For example, if the class were working on projects, the other students could use their creativity or technology capabilities, while my advanced pair could use their language skills to put the group's ideas into perfect English. If they saw their role as language experts, then they had more challenge while working on the same task as the others. As a little aside, I also suggested that by helping others, my super duo were, in fact, helping themselves, because if the others improved, then there would be less time when they were finished, and the others hadn't.

Although these are suggestions for advanced students, I have since used them in other levels equally effectively. The ideas are preparation-light, but hopefully useful for the students to find their learning opportunities. As my students are also paying customers, I think it is really important not to just find them 'busy' work but to find them something worthwhile and beneficial, not just for them but also for the others in my class. Would these ideas work for you? Try them and let me know.



Gareth Davies is a teacher, teacher trainer and storyteller. 2025 marks Gareth's 30th anniversary in the ELT profession. He started as a post boy at International House in London. Since then, he

has taught in Czechia, Portugal, Japan, Spain and the UK, he has run a successful Trinity CertTesol course in Prague and has written materials for several publishers. Gareth has given teacher training talks across the globe for OUP, CUP and Black Cat Cideb among others. You can currently find him in his element, teaching at a language school in Cardiff.