

## 5 Steps for Managing Your Multilevel Classroom

by [Glenda Rose](#) and [Kay Vaccaro](#)

If you have even two students, you probably have a multilevel classroom. When classes start having larger numbers, however, differences between students become more noticeable. In programs where all students are in the same classroom regardless of their English proficiency level, making sure students get what they need to continue to improve their English can be challenging. The tendency is often to “teach to the middle,” but there are ways to engage all of your students, regardless of their proficiency level, with just a little extra planning.

Here is what we recommend in our workshops on managing multilevel classrooms.

### 1. Understand Differentiation

First, always keep in mind *what* you can differentiate. Differentiating means customizing your lesson to meet individual students’ needs. You can differentiate three things:

- **Content**
- **Process**
- **Product**

That is, you can change what you teach, the activities students engage in, and the way you evaluate learning (see Tomlinson, 1995). As you are thinking through your lesson, ask yourself if you can adapt the content, or the activities, or the assessment so that all of your students will make progress toward their learning objective.

### 2. Get to Know Your Students

In order to decide what and how to adapt your lesson for a student’s particular needs, you really have to know the student well, taking into consideration personality, interests, readiness to learn, proficiency, and learning-style preferences. You can use formal assessments, formal and informal conversations, teacher observation, and so on to gather this information. You can also use conversation and writing activities to learn even more. Keep notes on your students’ interests and strengths so you can tap into them for lessons in the future.

### 3. Build a Repertoire of Teaching Strategies

Strategies include things like direct instruction, collaborative learning, and inquiry-based learning. Experiment with different instructional strategies to discover what works best for you and your students. Always start planning your instruction with a clear learning objective: What will students be able to *show* you that they can do at the end of class? That outcome objective may vary across different groups of students, so here is where differentiation begins. For example:

- *Level 1:* Students will be able to write a simple sentence (SVO) to identify their favorite season.

- *Level 2:* Students will be able to write three sentences to identify their favorite season and two of their favorite activities during that season with some descriptive detail.
- *Level 3:* Students will be able to write a short paragraph stating their favorite season as the topic sentence, providing three or four supporting detail sentences, and a concluding sentence.

Once you have a learning objective (and its variations for different students/groups), develop your instructional plan. Choose a lesson planning model that works for you. We like the following two models:

- **WIPPEA+R:** warm-up, introduce, present, practice (and practice, and practice some more), evaluate, and apply and reflect. (See the TEAL Center Fact Sheet No. 8: [Effective Lesson Planning](#))
- **The 5 E's:** engage, explore, explain, elaborate, evaluate. (See [Enhancing Education](#), n.d., for more on the 5 E's.)

We particularly like to use the 5 E's when creating [HyperDocs](#) (interactive digital lesson plans using Google Docs) for students to work on in their small groups. Whatever model you choose, as you work out the different stages of the lesson, consider where you might make changes to meet the needs of different students. This will likely include different grouping strategies for students. For example, you might start with a whole class activity, break into small groups, and reconvene at the end of class to reflect on the day's learning objectives. Smaller groups might be assigned according to how they are similar (proficiency levels, interests, or language backgrounds) or how they are different (making sure students with specific skill sets are in the group, that higher-level students are working with lower-level students, or different interests or opinions are present to stimulate conversation). Every aspect of your lesson, from the objectives to the choice of individual, pair, group or whole-class activities, from the warm-up to the outcomes and all the transitions in between, should be aligned so that the students are caught up in the flow of the class rather than the structure of the class.

#### 4. Build a Repertoire of Activities

Find and have ready to go a variety of activities that can be adapted to your students. Follow a Pinterest board for ideas (such as [ESL & Language Arts](#), by user Jenie P), or share ideas in the [TESOL communities](#). We recommend creating classroom [Learning Centers](#) where students can find activities to work on independently while you work with another student or small group of students. You can use file boxes to house folders that are color coded so that students know what activity is appropriate for their level. For example, in your Speaking/Listening Center, you could have different kinds of scripts, role-plays, open-ended interviews, and speech prompts. In a Reading Center, you could provide the same article from [Newsela](#) or [Breaking News English](#) at different levels with different comprehension activities. Set up Learning Centers for all kinds of content areas (math, science, social studies) and provide your students with the freedom to explore while providing yourself with the freedom to spend some one-on-one or one-on-a-few time with all your students. For more great activities, we recommend checking out [Teaching Large Multilevel Classes](#) by Natalie Hess (Cambridge University Press, 2001). It is full of great ideas that can be adapted to the needs of different students.

## 5. Have a Variety of Ways to Assess Student Learning

Remember that we differentiate **content**, **process**, and **product**. Whether you are evaluating by observation, with a formal assessment like a quiz or test, or with a final portfolio or project, you can tailor your evaluation based on the learning objectives that you set. For example, you can use different rubrics to evaluate written and oral work according to levels. Or, you can provide a different kind of product expectation for students. For example, perhaps you have some students who will create a poster, others who write a report, and still others who create a multimedia presentation. For each level, though, set your expectations high. We've seen many "low-level" groups produce better projects and presentations than the "high-level" groups in the classroom.

With these five steps in mind, you can work toward having a large, multilevel class become an individualized learning experience for students. Look for opportunities to adapt the content, process, or product to meet the needs of your students. Keep your students' personalities, interests, strengths, and challenges in mind as you choose instructional strategies. Include a wide range of activities and choose your grouping of students based on your learning objectives, instructional strategy, and activities. Finally, evaluate students based on their own progress toward their targeted learning outcome. Using these steps breaks us out of "one-size-fits-all" instruction and shows students that we value them as individuals as well as English language learners.

### References

Enhancing Education. (n.d.). The 5 E's. Retrieved from <http://enhancinged.wgbh.org/research/eeeeee.html>

Tomlinson, C. (1995). *Differentiating instruction for advanced learners in the mixed-ability middle school classroom*. Reston, VA.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children. (ERIC ED389141).

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