



Making the Multilevel ESL Classroom Work

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BACKGROUND

The multilevel ESL classroom in adult education and non-credit college programs is a challenging classroom construct that often exists in smaller schools where reasonably sized classes that generate enough funding to pay for instruction is difficult. The smaller schools out of necessity often combine levels to make it financially possible to administer their programs. In larger school systems, there are often satellite sites in the community. These sites exist in order to reach out to individuals who may not have the time or means to leave their neighborhood for English instruction. Some of these satellite programs also find it necessary to combine classes.

ESL instruction is generally skills based. In other words, the goal of programs is to help learners to be proficient in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In adult education and non-credit programs, it is assumed or indicated that students are learning English to function in a job, everyday life, and/or in academic environments. For this purpose, the language is taught in the context of one or a combination of these topic areas. This has given rise to theme-based and competency-based education, which means that the theme (housing, food, clothing, etc.) and the competencies become the context of instruction. This has led to two extremes in instruction that should be noted. 1) Instruction centers so much on the thematic information that survival trumps accuracy and more weight is given to getting -by than to communicating accurately. 2) Instruction is only about learning English for accuracy and communication is considered secondary to accuracy.

OBJECTIVES

Textbooks have reflected these two extremes and it often becomes the responsibility of the teacher and the curriculum to balance accuracy and fluency in communication. This is important when discussing multilevel ESL instruction because at the center of successful instruction is well-planned lessons with clear objectives for the levels being addressed. In competency education there seems to be a tendency to create performance objects which are either not measurable using words like “students will learn about”, “students will practice”, “students will read about”, etc. or performance objectives which are not of competencies but grammar like “students will use the present progressive”, or “students will learn the simple present”. It is important that teachers developing lesson plans for multilevel instruction recognize that grammar should not be considered the ends but perhaps in many cases part of the means. In other words, correct grammar usage can be part of the observed performance but should not be considered the objective absent of meaning. So an appropriate objective might be “By the end of class, students will be able to describe a sequence of daily routines using the simple present tense.”

It is often impractical for two or three levels in the same class to have the same objective for a given lesson. In this sense, multilevel ESL classes are two or three in one. However, note a few observations. 1) Grammar is learned best as a continuum. This means that although students at a low level are introduced to a grammar structure, it does not mean they “acquire” it in that level. In fact, students may take several levels before they can use a structure without thinking in real communication. 2) Objectives can often be extended to different levels by merely increasing the complexity or “how much” is expected. Therefore a broad goal that can be subdivided into simple to complex performances is ideal for multilevel ESL classes. This goal or “super-objective” is the controlling element to simplify planning and it also provides an opportunity to build community in the classroom by assuring that everything that students are learning at each level relates to one idea, theme, topic, or super-objective. Another important issue resolved by creating effective objectives is that higher-level students rarely find themselves in mentoring or tutoring roles except for when it naturally occurs in the classroom.

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See the examples below of objectives and super-objectives.

Theme/Topic	Food
Super Objective	By the end of class, students will be able to plan healthy meals.
Grammar	Count/Non Count Nouns; How many/How much
Objective Level 1	By the end of class, students will be able create a shopping list.
Objective Level 2	By the end of class, students will be able to use information from the food pyramid to distinguish good and bad eating habits.
Objective Level 3	By the end of class, students will be able develop a menu of healthy food choices based on data from government sources including the food pyramid.

Theme/Topic	HOUSING
Super Objective	By the end of class, students will be able to find housing information in classified ads
Grammar	Information Questions
Objective Level 1	By the end of class, students will be able to interpret basic information in a classified ad and answer simple questions.
Objective Level 2	By the end of class, students will be able to ask questions about basic information found in classified ads.
Objective Level 3	By the end of class, students will be able carry on a simple conversation with a real-estate agent or a rental property agent using information found in a classified ad.

Theme/Topic	COMMUNITY
Super Objective	By the end of class, students will be able to give or follow directions.
Grammar	Imperatives / Simple Present
Objective Level 1	By the end of class, students will be able to follow directions.
Objective Level 2	By the end of class, students will be able to follow and clarify directions.
Objective Level 3	By the end of class, students will be able to give, follow, and write directions.

GROUPING AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Pedagogy has emphasized differentiated instruction and cooperative learning for a few decades now. The idea is that when students have opportunities to practice and not just listen to language explanation and practice it in a more natural or task-based environment, they will improve more rapidly. This paradigm shift from lecturer to facilitator has found its way into many classrooms. Some teachers and students are challenged more with this aspect of language learning experiences than others. To function successfully in the multilevel classroom, it is imperative that cooperative learning be employed. Effective cooperative learning frees the teacher to work with different groups. It takes the burden of constant instruction away from the teacher and shares it with students who take roles within cooperative groups. In Multilevel ESL classes there are traditionally three types of grouping:

Whole Class is used to introduce the theme, super-objectives, and level objectives to the class developing community in the process. Whole class instruction often is used as well to complete a lesson and in some cases in the application stage.

Like-ability (same-ability) groups are groups where participants work in the same level together. The tasks can be individual where after completing an assignment the group compares answers to a worksheet or book work, pairs, and/or cooperative groups of four or five. All the members of the like-ability group is doing the same task or sharing a task. Each level has a task specific to its own objective.

Cross-ability (mixed-ability) groups are groups where participants do activities with students from other levels. These can be in pairs or cooperative groups.

LEARNER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

In all ESL classes and particularly in adult education and non-credit courses it is often suggested that EVERY class is multilevel. This is very apparent to those in the trenches. Students even at the same level might be strong in speaking and challenged in reading or writing for example. Since most classes are integrated, this becomes a real trial. In the intended or planned multilevel class this only serves to enhance the problem. Getting to know your students through open forums, discussions, questions, test, quizzes, and assessments will help the instructor plan activities appropriately. In some instances, it also becomes necessary to shift like-ability groups. In other words, a student might be at a particular level in speaking and another in writing. One technique to identify and remember these tendencies can be to provide colored folders for each student. The folders identify the primary level but then the instructor also puts labels on the folders to alert him or her of a different arrangement.

For example, imagine that Jose has a blue folder. The blue folder means he is a level 3 student. On his folder he has a yellow label. The yellow label means he is in group 2 for writing. The teacher plans a speaking like-ability task and asks all blue folders to form groups of four or five. Students with green folders get together and students with red folders get together.

Later the teacher asks students to get together by the label for a like-ability writing task. All students with a yellow label will then get together and students with orange labels work together. This may seem complicated, but in actuality the labels are applied after several weeks into the term so students learn to follow one set of instructions first. Of course, teachers with a clear knowledge of their students' strengths can do this without labels at all. A system such as this removes some of the possible stigmas that come from students being singled out as higher or lower than their classmates.

COMMUNITY

Good teachers in any ESL classroom develop a community through learner-centered instruction and cooperative learning techniques. Community is essential in the multilevel ESL classroom because if there is no community feeling between level, the instructor is basically teaching three classes at once and except for the most dedicated and tireless, teachers will eventually burn out not to mention that instruction will be less-effective than if community is present. In multilevel instruction, there is ample time to develop community between levels if good planning is engaged in thoughtfully and prudently.

A. Opening Classroom Activities

Since there is a common theme and related objectives, teachers can first address the topic and the objectives together as a class. The teacher might begin by finding a classroom task like a class poll or simple question and answer period to activate student background knowledge being careful to address lower-level students in a basic way with simpler questions than the higher levels. The teacher will also need more realia and visuals to help make a story, question, or scenario clearer.

It is important to add that there will be a tendency by the teacher if the group is of the same native language to speak in that language to help the lower-level students. This might build community but it doesn't provide learners an opportunity to develop listening skills. Teachers might find in these occasions that students will help each other not because they are directed to do so, but because they are in a cooperative environment. Even if the help is in another language by students, the teacher should try to speak only English. Some have found that when they regularly speak in the students' native language, students stop listening to the English spoken because they know the translation is coming. Practitioners may disagree on these points and there are often different amounts of translation use in the ESL classroom.

B. Cross-ability Activities

Cross-ability activities also bridge the divide between levels. These activities may be for some the most challenging to design but are often the most rewarding. The challenge is to make sure upper-level students do a task that meets their objective while lower-level students do a task with them that meets the particular objective of their level. Higher-level students will naturally help lower-level learners, so these tasks should never be designed or as a teacher-imposed mentor-mentee type of activity.

See a few examples below of cross-ability activities that ensure the objectives are focused for each of two levels.

Theme/Topic	Food
Super Objective	By the end of class, students will be able to plan healthy meals.
Grammar	Count/Non Count Nouns; How many/How much
Objective Level 1	By the end of class, students will be able create a shopping list.
Objective Level 2	By the end of class, students will be able to use information from the food pyramid to distinguish good and bad eating habits.
Objective Level 3	By the end of class, students will be able develop a menu of healthy food choices based on data from government sources including the food pyramid.

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Dialog - A model dialog is provided. Level 2 has the food pyramid. Level one has a list of foods that were learned in the previous like-ability activity. The foods are organized by food groups.

Level 2: What do we need at the store?

Level 1: fish, eggs, ground beef

Level 2: Fish is good. I think you need more fruits or vegetables. Look on this chart. They are important.

Level 1: OK maybe an apple.

Cooperative Task – Group activity where students decide and rank who has the best nutrition. The group is given a list of people and their eating habits for a day. In this case cooperative learning techniques are essential. A lower-level student might be a time keeper or might be a responder. Students in the group might be instructed to ask questions about the lower-level students' favorite food on the list or might just be asked to point to the person he or she thinks has the best nutrition.

Information-Gap

The lower-level student might have information that a higher-level student might need to complete a task like a chart or a classifying activity. In this lesson, the upper-level student might be given the task of putting different foods into classifications based on food groups and the lower-level student has a list of foods.

Paired Dictation

The lower-level student might be asked to give dictation to the upper-level student. This might be advantages in the reverse but be careful not to resort to mentor-mentee situations.

Completing of Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers like VENN diagrams are good for this type of activity because once started, it is often easy to understand the process without speaking a great deal which puts the upper and lower-level students on equal footing. Students in pairs or groups could be asked to put items in a VENN diagram. The diagram might be from a list of foods two individuals ate in a day. A dialog could be created after this activity as well.

C. Other Classroom Activities

Other activities to develop community might be what some have called "Same/Different". These activities can be done with the whole class, but students at different levels are expected to do more or less. A few examples might be:

Dictation: Students at the lower levels are given a cloze-type activity while the higher levels are given a blank sheet of paper.

Spelling Tests: Students at the lower levels are only responsible for the first few words and more words are required at the higher the level.

Silent Response: Students are given numbered pictures. The instructor says phrases and long sentences to describe them. Students respond by showing the number of fingers that correspond to the picture number. A similar activity is when the teacher asks yes/no questions and students respond by showing a 3/5 card. Yellow for example could mean **Yes** and a blue card could mean **No**.

D. Application and Closing Activities

Sometimes the application activity can meet the needs of all the objectives of each level particularly if it is a cooperative task. If this isn't possible, than the class should be brought back together to develop community and have the levels report on their application like-ability task.

PLANNING

Planning should create a series of activities that provide objective-driven activities that meet the needs of all students, provide community building opportunities and relief from long periods of lecture over facilitation.

Important Note: Teaching of any kind and especially multilevel instruction is a skill that can be developed over time. No teacher should expect to master all aspects of this type of instruction after study and maybe a workshop or two. It takes practice. It is suggested that instructors start simple. Don't divide the class up at first but get to know the students. One such process might look like the following:

- 1) Meet with the whole class for the first two weeks. Do activities like same/different, assessments like writing, and ice breakers. This will give you time to assess the level of each student. Maintain a log of what you have learned.
- 2) After a few weeks, pass out colored folders that will identify the levels without pointing a student out as higher or lower. Start out dividing the class into only two levels no matter how large each group is. Do only whole class and like-ability activities for a few weeks and practice going from group to group. Set up contingency plans in case groups finish a task early and learn how to accommodate both groups. Learn how quickly or how slowly each group works when they are in their like-ability groups.
- 3) After you are comfortable, if needed divide the class into three groups and practice as you did in step 2.
- 4). Once you are comfortable with two or three levels, add one cross-ability activity a week.
- 5) Once you understand and are comfortable with how cross-ability works, add these activities to every lesson.

There is more than one way to set up your multilevel sequence of activities. One is called the WIPPEA model. This model first developed by Madeline Hunter for single-level classes has the following steps:

- **Warm-up:** Start with previously learned content. Often this can be from the application of the previous lesson. It can be like-ability, cross-ability, or same/different.
- **Introduction:** Introduce the theme, super-objective, and level objectives stating them clearly for the whole group through a community-building opening activity.
- **Presentation:** Introduce new information to each group while the other groups are listening. Start with the higher group because they can get started on their own with little help from the teacher. Explain and model the task so all can hear.
- **Practice:** Ask all to start the practice of the task you have given them. If this is a like-ability activity, work with the lowest group and extend your presentation for more hands –on instruction. Be prepared to check on other groups. If it is a cross-ability activity, make sure you have been clear in modeling the activity.
- **Evaluation:** Check to see if each level and most of the students are prepared to do the application. If they are not, do additional presentations and practices using appropriate like-ability, cross-ability, or same/different activities.
- **Application:** Design an activity where students apply what they have learned (cross-ability or like-ability).

	Level C (Highest)	Level B	Level A (Lowest)
WARM-UP / REVIEW:	Warm-up Worksheet C Discuss food groups	Warm-up Worksheet B Identify food groups	Warm-up Worksheet A Identify food groups
INTRODUCTION / OBJECTIVE:	Super Objective: List different foods on the board. Ask students which are healthier. Teach students to show one finger for healthier and two fingers for less healthy.		
	By the end of class, students will be able to <i>plan healthy meals and discuss changes in diet to improve health.</i>	By the end of class, students will be able to <i>plan healthy meals.</i>	By the end of class, students will be able to <i>identify foods for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.</i>
PRESENTATION LIKEABILITY:	Use the visuals on page 51 <i>Stand Out Book 2 2nd Edition</i> . Ask the group about the foods each eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Help the low-level students recognize the name and the three meals (breakfast, lunch, and dinner). Ask questions such as; <i>What does Silvia eat and drink for breakfast?</i>		
	Prepare students for the practice. Ask students in their opinions who has a better breakfast, Gilberto or Rosa. Make a few more examples and briefly review what ranking is.		Prepare students for the practice. Have them make a chart with three columns. The column heads are <i>Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner</i> . Quiz students on the items from page 53. Ask them to close their books and guess whether a food item you give them is for which meal. Have them write their answers like dictation in the chart.
PRACTICE / EVALUATION LIKEABILITY:	Ask students to do Exercise E on page 51 in groups of three or four. In this exercise, they rank the best nutrition. After they rank the meals, ask a student to have groups report and compare. Monitor their discussion as an evaluation.	Ask students to do Exercise E on page 51 in groups of three or four. In this exercise, they rank the best nutrition. Ask students in pairs to make one days meal from the five given that would be the most nutritious. Ask for reports as an evaluation.	Ask students in groups to put all the remaining food items from Page 51 into the chart. Check their charts and evaluate their understanding.
	Contingency: Contingency Worksheet B,C.	Contingency: Contingency Worksheet B,C	Contingency: Contingency A
PRESENTATION CROSS-ABILITY:	Prepare students for the practice. Go over their earlier discussions. Check their work. Review page 51 again. Prepare them to do Exercise A on page 51. Write the following conversation on the board: Student 1: What does Silvia eat for breakfast? Student 2: She eats <u>cereal</u> . Student 1: What does she drink? Student 2: She drinks <u>milk</u> .		

PRACTICE / EVALUATION CROSS-ABILITY:	<p>Students ask the questions to A and B levels. They should make a distinction between <i>eat</i> and <i>drink</i>. Ask them to help the students they converse with in this aspect.</p> <p>For evaluation observe and ask volunteers to demonstrate in front of the class.</p>	<p>Students ask questions and respond to questions in complete sentences. Speaking to A and C levels.</p> <p>For evaluation observe and ask volunteers to demonstrate in front of the class.</p>	<p>Students respond to questions with one-word answers speaking to B and C levels.</p> <p>For evaluation observe and ask volunteers to demonstrate in front of the class.</p>
OTHER CROSS-ABILITY AS EXAMPLES:	<p>Additional Cross-ability as an example:</p> <p>Ask students in pairs to do a VENN diagram comparing the breakfast, lunch, and dinner of Rosa and Augustin from page 52.</p> <p>Additional Cross-ability as an example:</p> <p>Ask students in groups to plan a breakfast lunch, and dinner for three days as if they were a family. Ask them to make sure the meals are nutritious.</p>		
PRESENTATION SAME/DIFFERENT	<p>Prepare students for the practice. Students will listen to the same information. Students will have different tasks. Prepare them by going over the food items on page 51 again.</p> <p>Give the following dictation:</p> <p><i>Rosa is a good cook and she is healthy. She likes many different foods like turkey, yogurt, and soup. She eats toast for breakfast. She also likes coffee. She knows that coffee may not be healthy.</i></p>		
PRACTICE / EVALUATION SAME/DIFFERENT	<p>Give this level the following and ask the students to complete it while listening to the dictation.</p> <p>_____ and she is healthy. She _____ many different foods like _____, _____, and _____. She eats toast for breakfast. _____ She knows that coffee may not be healthy.</p> <p>Ask students to compare answers with other levels to check their answers.</p>	<p>Give this level the following and ask the students to complete it while listening to the dictation.</p> <p><i>Rosa is a good _____ and she is healthy. She likes many different _____ like _____, yogurt, and _____. She _____ toast for breakfast. She also _____ coffee. She knows that coffee may not be healthy.</i></p> <p>Ask students to compare answers with other levels to check their answers.</p>	<p>Give this level the following and ask the students to complete it while listening to the dictation.</p> <p><i>Rosa is a good cook and she is healthy. She likes many different _____ like _____, yogurt, and soup. She eats _____ for breakfast. She also likes _____. She knows that coffee may not be healthy.</i></p> <p>Ask students to compare answers with other levels to check their answers.</p>
APPLICATION	<p>Ask students in groups to imagine they are creating a website for nutritious meals that are delivered to customers. Have them describe meals and discuss what should be included.</p>	<p>Ask students to plan meals for their own families or for themselves for a week. Then ask them to compare the meals with a partner.</p>	<p>Ask students to complete a chart describing what they have eaten for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.</p>

