

Teaching guide: Maximising mixed ability classes

This guide gives new and experienced teachers a selection of practical ideas and activities to enhance their lessons for mixed ability GCSE MFL students.

Providing learning mats for students

A learning mat is a resource that contains the vocabulary and grammar needed for a lesson. As an optional add on, it can also provide a space for students to complete lesson activities, assessment criteria that may be needed to self or peer assess written or spoken work, guided planning prompts for writing or speaking, etc.

Providing students with such a resource would ensure that students would have the knowledge they need for reference during their lesson practice, and it would be at the teacher's discretion whether students are allowed to access it during specific activities or are required to rely on their memory for recall.

Students as masters of their own level of challenge

One of the most straightforward ways to cater to different levels in the classroom is to provide a selection of ideas on how language can be improved. In this way, teachers can model the thinking process that they, as proficient linguists, would use in order to produce high-level pieces.

These ideas could be provided in order of complexity or students could be provided with the list of ideas and given the choice as to which one(s) they implement in their own work. They may be provided at the planning stage and then also be used when giving feedback on the same piece.

It's important to really extend students by increasing the level of demand of the ideas to allow for genuine progression, rather than simply asking for more of the same of what is required at a lower level.

For example, here are some 'write like a linguist' ideas for the written task statement 'Expressing opinions about social media':

- Say what your favourite type of social media is and why.
- Say which types of social media you most like and dislike with reasons.
- Give your opinions on social media and predict future trends.
- Say if you could live without social media and why.
- Say what you think should be done to avoid the risks of social media.

Same stimulus, different questions

Another way to challenge students in different ways is to work on the same listening or reading text with different activity choices of varying difficulty. Students could be allowed the flexibility to complete as many of the tasks as possible, in order not to cap their progress.

There are many ways in which a text could be exploited:

- Match these words from the text with their English equivalents.
- Find this word in the text.
- Highlight this category of word (negatives, opinions, past tenses, etc.)
- Gap fill - English may be provided for support.
- Finish this sentence with information from the text.
- Find a synonym/antonym for this word.
- Reading comprehension questions.
- Write questions about the text for your partner to answer.
- 'Who said this' questions.
- Write a title for each paragraph.
- Translate the last paragraph of the text.
- Turn paragraph one into images and then try to reconstruct it just by looking at the images.
- Write one more paragraph.

Best of three

Rather than asking students to complete an exam style written/spoken question, provide them with three examples of responses to a question and ask them to identify strengths and weaknesses, then ask them to rank the responses in order and explain why.

After collaborating as a group and identifying criteria for success, they can move onto their own versions independently.

My teacher's favourite sentences

After giving students feedback for a productive task, select a number of excellent sentences from students' work to share with the class. Students could translate these into English and then identify what makes them such special sentences.

This would serve as a model of good writing as well as praise for those students who wrote them.

These sentences don't always come from Higher students, so featuring in *My teacher's favourite sentences* can become a strong motivator for some students who struggle with writing.

See three before me - C3B4ME

A good response to cries of 'I'm stuck' is to provide a number of sources of information that will help students become 'unstuck' and to train them on how to use them.

These could be as simple as 'look in your writing frame' or 'ask a friend', and as complex as 'use your verb ending table'.

Role reversal

Students become teachers by correcting texts. Mistakes can either be already highlighted for students to correct or not for extra challenge.

Vocabulary tests

In a mixed ability setting, even a basic vocabulary test can lend itself to differentiation. Students could be asked to produce simplified answers:

- answers in English
- completing a word for which the first letter has been provided
- letters missing in a word, rather than the whole word
- any words related to a specific topic.

Or they could be asked to produce more challenging answers:

- answers in target language
- answers containing a letter or sound
- same verb, different tense
- synonyms of a word.

And, of course, a mix of answer types may be the best way forward for your class.

Pre-learning

Pre-learning the words before they are needed is a highly effective way to promote confidence and a sense of achievement, especially on students who feel anxious about language learning.

This could be done by providing a vocabulary list to learn before the lesson, or a link to an online testing site, or it could be done at the beginning of the lesson, before formal learning starts.

Positive pair work

Don't overlook one of the most valuable resources in classrooms – the students. Using pair work creatively and constructively can help students of all abilities to make progress.

Pairing together higher/lower attaining students for support

The lower attaining student receives one-to-one support from their peer and the higher attaining student galvanises their learning by being able to **teach** their partner.

Pairing Foundation and Higher students in a classroom situation can be a good way of stretching and challenging both tiers of learner with tasks such as differentiated exam practice.

Speaking clocks

This is a good activity to foster positive pair work and encourage spontaneous speaking.

Students stand in two equal numbered circles, one inside the other and face-to-face.

The circles take it in turns to move like a clock, asking a question stipulated on the board by the teacher or of their own choosing to the person facing them before moving on. When the time is up, it is the turn of the other circle to move.

This could also be done as a speed-dating exercise, where students sit on two parallel lines, facing each other.

Trapdoor reading

This is an excellent way to practise pronunciation and fluency when speaking, as well as offering a platform for independent written work. It can be done as a whole class activity to demonstrate and later completed in pairs.

The teacher starts with a text on the board or a worksheet in the target language, offering multiple choices before 'dropping' to the next level, as if through a trap door.

Students must find the correct 'path' through the text to successfully get from start to finish.

If they get a level wrong they go back to the start and it is another student's turn. Once the correct pathway has been found, students can use the template to create their own trapdoor activity for their partner to navigate.

Example

- Last week I donated £1/£2/£5 to charity.
- The charity I supported was for homeless people/dogs/children.
- And for my donation I received a badge/cake/pen.

This can be done in pairs, in order to ensure maximum participation.

Great group work

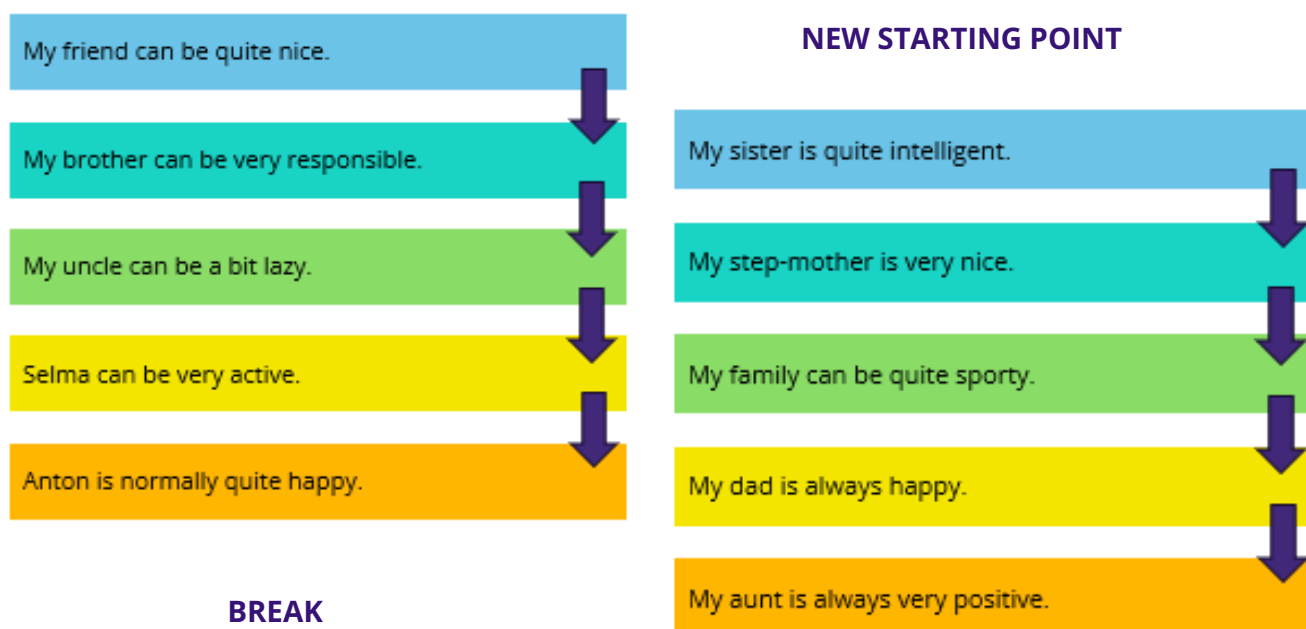
Many of the principles of positive pair work also apply to great group work.

Staggered translation

In staggered translation, students work in groups of three, where one of them has the answers to a number of translations and the other two take it in turns to translate the sentences correctly. If they do, they move on. If they make a mistake, the student with the answers will tell them the correct answer, they lose their turn and have to start from sentence one next time.

In order to make this exercise more manageable there is a 'break' in the middle that, if students reach, can become their new starting point.

Example



Running dictation

This is a classic example of how group work can facilitate improved spelling and written skills, as students are grouped according to teacher preference and seated away from a text stuck on a wall or door some distance away.

The groups have a certain time limit to take turns to read a line of the text and bring it back to the team. When the time limit is up, the group with the most complete and accurate text wins the game.

This task facilitates peer correction and support, as well as accurate spelling and grammar.

Other suggestions

Finally, in a mixed ability environment it's always worth considering:

- recyclable language glossaries
- high-level language glossaries
- choice homework tasks
- scaffolding
- retrieval/repetition activities to support memory
- live modelling of the completion of complex tasks
- use of transcripts for listening
- Higher and Foundation tenses lists
- writing frames
- key vocabulary
- sentence starters
- mini whiteboards
- different versions of texts
- student speaking criteria
- varied seating plans
- regular feedback
- higher order questions for higher attaining students.