Teaching mixed ability IELTS classes: strategies, approaches & activities

Jo Tomlinson and Fiona Aish
Today we will...

... discuss the challenges of mixed ability IELTS classes
... explore some potential solutions
... apply our ideas to materials evaluation & planning
Discussion 1: What is your context like?

• Describe a typical IELTS class in your institution.
• Do you have mixed ability IELTS classes? Why? Why not?
• What challenges do mixed ability IELTS classes present?
1. Different levels of language, skills & test knowledge bring challenges.
Challenges of mixed ability IELTS classes

Maintaining motivation
Managing students’ expectations
Planning lessons and courses
Responding to students’ individual needs
Choosing and writing materials
Ensuring students all make progress
Discussion 2: How do you manage?

- What do you find most difficult with mixed ability IELTS classes?
- What strategies/approaches do you have for specific difficulties?
- What activities do you use that improve your teaching?
- Which course books/materials work best for this type of class?
2. Planning, classroom management & activities can address these challenges.
Planning – The flipped classroom

**Definition:** Students are introduced to some of the material before class then practice, discuss and activate the material during class time.

**Aim:** to give students time to assimilate the material at their own pace and provide a more active learning experience in the class.
## Benefits of flipped learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low level students</th>
<th>High level students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allows sts to spend lots of time on language.</td>
<td>Can focus on gaining a deeper understanding.</td>
<td>Can give specific preparation tasks to different students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can improve confidence and motivation.</td>
<td>Can help students push themselves.</td>
<td>Enables a more productive use of class time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can raise awareness of level and work required to improve.</td>
<td>Can reduce dissatisfaction with being in a mixed ability class.</td>
<td>Helps tailor specific support to students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can encourage class participation.</td>
<td>Gives sts more control.</td>
<td>Promotes independent learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classroom management

Student buddies/ teams of the same level
Strong + strong students together - focus on accuracy
Strong + weak students together – if you know it, teach others
Pair sts with complementary skills for specific tasks
Nominate sts/ pairs to explain specific answers
Writing feedback – ‘Teacher please check the following 3 areas...’
sts peer assess each other’s work using the public criteria for Sp and Wr
Reflection & goal setting

Reflection questions:

- What did I learn about my ability to do ....?
- Who helped me today?
- Who did I help?
- What test technique did I use today which was useful?
- What did I do today which was not helpful?
- What tips would I give other students?

Setting goals for different levels:

- What language do I want to learn from today?
- Make a plan to improve skills e.g. scanning, reading speed.
- Analyse wrong answers.
- Do the task again at home and notice the difference.
- Record speaking tasks every day.
- Rewrite writing tasks with corrections/improvements.
Activities for mixed ability IELTS classes

Strong sts: explain correct/incorrect answers for receptive skills
   collaborate on writing tasks
   create useful vocab list from text & audioscript
   use more error correction

Weak sts: use templates for writing & speaking tasks
   check audioscript before feedback on listening tasks
   reduce word limit on writing tasks & time on speaking tasks

General: in pairs, sts write tasks for each other
   in pairs/ groups sts create a ‘test quiz’ & test each other
3. Evaluating and tweaking materials can help us teach mixed ability IELTS classes.
Suggestions for adapting materials

**Activities:**

• Brainstorm zoo based vocabulary (done as preparation)
• Teach/ peer teach pronunciation of key words – encouraging, prey, exhibition, penguin, building
• Predict type of answer for each space and possibilities
• Do Ex 4 as a whole class directing specific Qs to specific sts
• Ask sts to explain exam advice to each other and add more tips
• Different pairs write audioscript for each question type then explain how they wrote it and why

*Material: Complete IELTS, Brook-Hart & Jakeman, p.50 Listening*
Discussion 4: How could you use this material?

Think about:

• The flipped classroom approach
• Classroom management strategies – pairings & groupings, reflection questions & goal setting
• Tweaking, adapting & supplementing the material
Any questions?

Thanks for listening

www.facebook.com/TargetEnglishUK
twitter.com/TargetEnglishUK

jo@target-english.co.uk   fiona@target-english.co.uk