

Teaching tip: Coping with mixed abilities

If you have a weaker class or if there are differences in the levels within your class, try out the following techniques to cope with this everyday teaching challenge.

1 Weaker classes

You might have a class which is challenged by the material in the book and needs a little more support from the teacher. Such classes sometimes benefit from working at a slower pace and going through the exercises in more depth. Try to find the balance between giving your students a helping hand and encouraging them to work independently.

a Get students to predict what a text is about.

If you ask students to use pictures, a title or some some known words to predict what a text is about, they feel more comfortable when they have to then listen to or read the text – it's as if they already know something about it. You could also ask them to predict some of the language they might hear/read.

✓ Good for listening and reading texts, e.g. *Network 1*, Unit 6, Step 1 (conversation in activity 2):

Ask students to look at the photo on page 88 and tell you what they see. Get as many details as possible. Ask them where the man and woman are. Then ask them to brainstorm any words or phrases which they might hear in a restaurant. Write these on the board.

b Put a choice of answers on the board.

If students find it difficult to find an answer, help them with a choice. If only one answer is needed, give them a choice of three – the correct answer and two incorrect ones – to choose from. If they have to find several answers, write them all on the board, adding a couple of wrong ones.

- ✓ Good for any exercise where there is only one correct answer, e.g. *Network Starter*, Unit 1, Step 3, Activity 2a:

Write the following words on the board: *apple, mountain bike, rose, computer, baby, cup, key, hamburger, ice-cream*. Any students who need help can look at the list and choose an item for each picture. To make it a little more challenging, add two more words which are not correct, e.g.: *banana, bag*.

c Break up listening exercises.

If your students seem overwhelmed by listening texts, break them into two or three chunks, stopping at appropriate moments to give your learners the chance to catch up, write any answers down and take a breath.

- ✓ Good for long listening texts, e.g. *Network 1*, Unit 2, Step 3, Ex. 2b:

Play the dialogue through once, but tell your learners that they should just listen. When the dialogue is finished, let them write down anything they can remember. Then play it again, but stop twice: First time after Gaby says *Karl likes Christmas in New Zealand – in the hot weather*. and then after Gaby says *I work in the garden a lot when the weather is good*. Breaking the text up gives the students the chance to get as many details down as possible.

d Pre-teach vocabulary.

Learners are more confident if they feel they are better prepared for a listening or reading text. Use mime, demonstrations, descriptions, explanations and synonyms to make sure that they know the meanings of challenging words or phrases before they read or listen.

Avoid simply giving a German translation and choose words/phrases which might be useful and which they probably don't know at this level. But, make sure you don't do this for every text they listen to or read as we don't want to give them the impression that they must understand every word in a text.

✓ Good for listening and reading texts, e.g. *Network 1*, Unit 4, Step 3, text on MGM and *Panorama* texts:

The words on the left are from the three texts. Write them on the board. Use the different ways shown here to give the class the meanings:

<i>couple</i> – (explanation:)	<i>a man and a woman, usually husband and wife</i>
<i>to offer</i> – (explanation:)	<i>to give if a person wants it</i>
<i>impersonal</i> – (demonstration:)	demonstrate being friendly first in a personal and then in an impersonal way
<i>view</i> – (description:)	look out the classroom window and describe the view
<i>service</i> – (explanation:)	get students to tell you what service you might get in a hotel (helpful receptionist, cleaners, restaurants with friendly waiters, etc.)

e Let students compare their answers.

Students don't feel under pressure if they know they have the same answer as someone else – even if it might be wrong. Let your students compare their answers with their partner before checking in class.

✓ Good at the end of any exercise where students have worked individually.

2 Differences within a class

If you have a mix of abilities within your class, it's important to make sure the stronger students are not bored and the weaker learners are not overchallenged. It's good to mix the students every so often so that the stronger ones can help the weaker ones - and a weaker student in one pair may be the stronger one in another! And don't forget, learners have different strengths, so someone who is not very strong at listening exercises might be very talented at learning vocabulary.

The ideas below will help you make sure everyone has the best possible learning experience, whether he/she is among the more able or the less able learners.

a Stop certain students dominating.

- If in an activity your learners shall ask you questions, give each learner for example three paper clips or *M&M* chocolates. Each time a learner asks you a question, they must give up a paperclip/eat a chocolate. Once their paperclips/chocolates are gone, they can't ask any more questions. This way they all have an equal chance. (NB: If your students have a question on unknown words or on the activity itself, they can, of course, ask questions even if they don't have any paperclips/chocolates left.)
- If you name the students who you would like to hear, the dominant ones will find it difficult to interrupt.
- ✓ Good for any class-based activity, e.g. *Network Starter*, Unit 2, Step 1, Activity 2a.
- ✓ Good for checking answers in class.

b Give three options.

It is good to give learners the responsibility for their own learning. By offering a choice of different levels within one exercise, you are giving them the opportunity to decide how much they want to be challenged. And you can encourage weaker learners to try a more difficult option every once in a while.

- ✓ Good for listening exercises, e.g. *Network 1*, Unit 4, Step 2, Ex. 3b:

Write the following three tasks on the board. The first task, with one star, is the easy option, the second one a little more difficult and the last one, with three stars, is more challenging. Let the students choose which one they want to do.

- * Listen for information for seven of the questions.
- ** Listen for information for all 14 questions.
- *** Answer all 14 questions and then write the times in no. 1, 2 and 13 in words.

- ✓ Good for reading exercises, e.g. *Network 1*, Unit 3, Step 3, *Panorama*:
Follow the instructions above.

- * Read one of the texts. Look up any words you don't know in the Dictionary pp. 157-171 or ask your teacher.
- ** Read both texts, write down any words which are new for you.

*** After you have read the two texts, choose five words you would like to remember and write a new sentence for each of them.

You can use the three-star options as extensions for a stronger group.

c Have extra questions ready for quicker students.

This idea can be used either if you have more able students in a class or if the whole class tends to be stronger.

✓ Good for individual or partner exercises, e.g. *Network Starter*, Unit 4, Step 3, Activity 1c:

Write the following sentences on the board:

I _____ go to the cinema on Fridays.

I _____ go to bed at 10 pm.

I _____ listen to the radio.

If any students finish the sentences in the book, they can complete these ones too.

d Demonstrate an activity.

Sometimes it's better to show your class how to do an activity than give them long instructions. Choose a more able student to help you if the activity is a role-play.

✓ Good for activities which might need complicated instructions like information gap exercises and for role-plays, e.g. *Network 1*, Unit 3, Review, Ex 2:

Ask a more able student to open his/her book on page 117. Then ask the rest of the class to open their books on page 113. Tell the class about Mark and Karin in simple words. Ask the more able student *Did Karin go to Berlin on Monday, too?* When he/she has answered correctly (*Yes.*), ask if he/she has got a question for you about Mark. Do one more example each (i.e. asking for Karin's and Mark's activities) and then put the rest of the class in pairs to finish the exercise.