

Multilevel Strategies

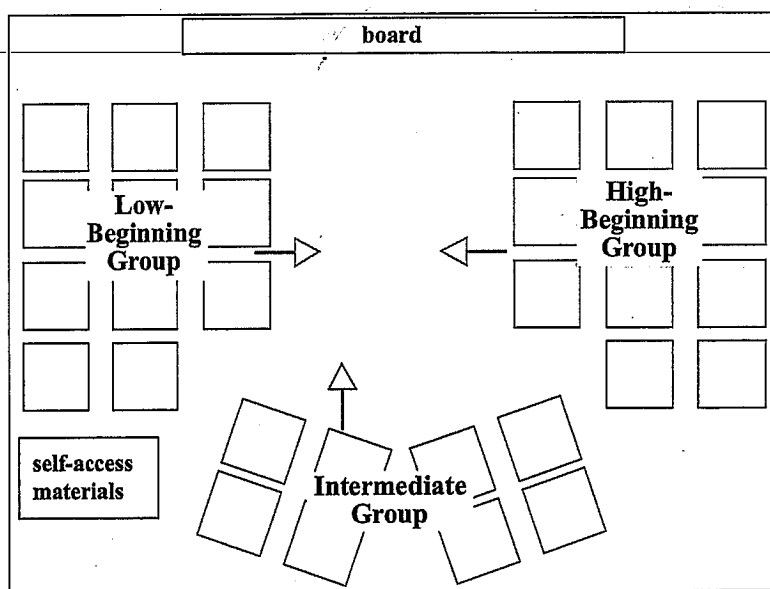
The body of research on multilevel instruction includes numerous references to the work published by Bell (1991), Terrill and Shanks (1995), Hess (2001), and the ESL Teacher Institute training materials developed by Hampson and Knight-Mendelson and revised by CALPRO (2004). Each of these materials focuses on similar sets of strategies that lead to successful multilevel instruction. The seven following strategies work equally well with single-level variations, narrow-spectrum, and broad-spectrum multilevel classes.

Multilevel Strategy 1

Identify three ability groups in a class to aid instructional planning.

Once learners' needs have been assessed (see page 9), it is helpful to create three basic proficiency groups. In classes where learners are not formally identified as being at different levels, it may be helpful to think of these three groups as pre-level, on-level, and higher-level. For classes with learners enrolled at different levels you could label the groups lower-level, mid-level and higher-level (or even A, B and C). In a class with a broad spectrum of learners ranging from pre-literacy level to intermediate-high, the lower-level group might include both pre-lit and beginning-low learners, the mid-level group might be the beginning-high learners and the higher-level group would be the intermediate-low learners.

The membership of these groups may shift based on the proficiency focus of the lesson (e.g., a strong writer may be less skilled in speaking and so work with one group of learners on a writing task and another group of learners on a speaking task). Even in classes where there are four or more distinct levels, creating three general groups will help facilitate instruction and learner interaction by allowing teachers to plan learning activities to match the proficiencies of their learners.



An example of grouping in a class with tab arm desks. Arrows indicate learners' visual orientation.

Reflect On... Grouping by Proficiency

Think about and answer the following questions in your teaching journal:
What are some benefits and drawbacks of grouping learners by level within a class?
How can instructors keep track of group affiliations if learners move in and out of groups depending on the lesson proficiency focus?

Multilevel Strategy 2

Plan lessons around a single theme or topic then identify level-specific objectives.

After assessing your learners' needs and comparing those needs to your course curriculum, as well as to state and federal standards, lesson planning can be simplified by looking at themes or general topics that work across levels. *Shopping for Clothing, Eating Well, and Seeking Medical Treatment* are examples of topics that would be meaningful for learners at all levels. Once a topic has been identified for a lesson, the teacher determines the language needs within that topic for each of the three identified proficiency groups and creates three level-specific lesson objectives.

Imagine, for example, that you are teaching a narrow-spectrum multilevel class with beginning-low, beginning-high, and intermediate-low learners. The topic is clothing, and for one lesson you've created the following three objectives:

- Beginning-low learners will be able to identify 8–10 clothing items by color and price.
- Beginning-high learners will be able to ask for a clothing item by color and size.
- Intermediate-low learners will be able to return a clothing item and request an exchange for another size or color.

In this class, the beginning-low learners will be exposed to language that supports all three objectives, but only held accountable for achieving their level objective. The beginning-high and intermediate-low learners will benefit from the review inherent in the presentation of the beginning-low material, and incorporate that material as they work to achieve their own level objectives.

Task: Create multilevel objectives.

Imagine that you've taught the lesson above and are now planning the next day's lesson. Your mid-level objective is "Learners will be able to interpret common clothing care labels." Develop two parallel objectives for your lesson, one for the lower-level group and one for the higher-level group.

Multilevel Strategy 3

Begin and end each class session with a whole-class activity to build class community.

The success of the multilevel class depends on learners' ability to work together in mixed-level groups. It's critical to establish from the outset that *all* learners, no matter what their proficiency level, contribute to the language-learning process.

Begin the class with a community-building warm-up activity that involves all learners. Later, close the class with an activity that brings the class back together to recognize the value of what they've done. During these types of activities, learners identify what they've learned during the lesson or evaluate how well the class went that day. One way to do this is to pose the question *What did we work on today?* to the whole class and elicit responses. Promote the idea that learners can and have learned from each other.

Task: Create a closing activity.

List three or more ways learners could share what they learned or how they felt about the lesson with you and their classmates.

Multilevel Strategy 4

Present new information to the whole class at one time.

A whole-class presentation in a multilevel class has to be comprehensible to the lower-level learners and yet challenging enough for the higher-level learners. Learners at all levels can usually understand more than they can produce, but using visuals, realia, demonstrations, repetition, and the occasional translation of a word or phrase, ensures that lower-level learners can get the gist of higher-level material. During the portions of a whole-class presentation that are review for higher-level learners, these learners can be engaged by more complex level-appropriate prompts and questions from the instructor. Those same learners can also model language that is new to other learners.

It may be helpful to conduct a mini-presentation to one level when a grammar point or vocabulary set is either too basic or too complex to be presented across levels. That said, one of the benefits of the multilevel environment is that lower-level learners are exposed to more language than they otherwise would be if they were in a regular class. They can usually rise to the challenge of listening to a contextualized presentation of a higher-level grammar point, as long as they're not asked to produce the new form. Once higher-level learners have begun practicing the new form in their same-level group, it's often possible to draw out one element from the higher-level grammar point for lower-level learners to work on (e.g., after being exposed to the future tense in a presentation on making plans using the future conditional *If I don't have to work on Saturday, I'll go to the beach*, lower-level learners can work with future tense statements about weekend plans, such as *I'll go to the beach on Saturday*).

Note, however, that in situations where one level group needs to learn material that would be irrelevant to other levels, it's best to make a separate mini-presentation to that group. For example, to achieve their objective of being able to interpret an apartment lease, higher-level learners might need an explicit presentation on active vs. passive voice (*The security deposit will not be returned in the following cases...*) The teacher would teach this form while mid- and lower-level learners were engaged in practice activities that related to the general presentation on renting an apartment.

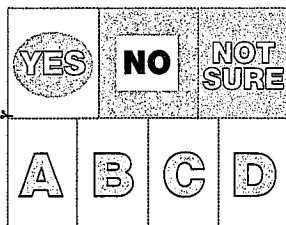
Another technique for matching all learners' needs during a whole-class presentation is to follow the presentation by directing different types of questions to each level. For example, the following questions might be directed to learners after a presentation on shopping for clothing:

For pre-level learners, *Point to the red shirt. Is this a red shirt?*

For on-level learners, *Is this a red shirt or a red skirt? What color is the shirt? How much is the skirt?*

For higher-level learners, *What kind of shirt does she want? Does she need a receipt to exchange it?*

One of the pitfalls of asking questions in the multilevel class is that higher-level learners will often answer before lower-level learners can get a word in. Avert this with the use of answer cards, which allow you to check the comprehension of all learners. In response to your *Yes/No* questions, learners silently hold up a "yes", "no", or "not sure" card. You can further challenge higher-level learners by using a *Yes/No* question with a complex structure (e.g., *Would the shirt be less expensive than the skirt if they both went on sale for half price?*)



Using index cards makes it easier to identify learners' responses at a glance.

Task: Write directed questions.

Imagine you're presenting information on prescription labels. Look at a prescription label and write 5 simple *Yes/No* questions and 5 more complex *Yes/No* questions about the information on the label.

Multilevel Strategy 5

Use same-level³ grouping to provide guided practice for learners.

Grouping learners in same-level groups⁴ ensures that they get the processing and practice time they need to achieve their level objective. As mentioned earlier, practice activities that can work on more than one level are very valuable in the multilevel class. One example would be a Total Physical Response activity in which same-level pairs take turns giving and acting out commands. In the classroom, pre- or lower-level learners in one area of the room would listen and respond to your commands, on- or mid-level pairs in another area of the room would take turns using written commands or picture prompts to command each other, and higher-level pairs would work with commands or create new commands at a higher language level.

When learners work autonomously in same-level groups, it's a great opportunity for you to facilitate and observe learners' level of accuracy, their use of the grammar and vocabulary that support the objective, and their pronunciation of target language.

Task: Create same-level practice activities.

Imagine that you are teaching a class on making a doctor's appointment. Identify different ways you could adapt a picture and conversation on this subject to serve as the basis for each of your three groups' same-level practice.

Multilevel Strategy 6

Use mixed-level⁴ group activities to provide learners with communicative practice and fluency building.

Putting learners in mixed-level groups creates opportunities for them to apply new language in communicative practice activities that build fluency. By working in this type of group, pre-level learners often challenge themselves, and higher-level learners reinforce their learning by facilitating learning for others.

An example of this phenomenon can be seen in a mixed-level peer dictation, the "teacher" role typically goes to the higher-level learner and the "student" role goes to the lower-level learner. By design, the higher-level learner practices pronunciation, while the lower-level learner practices listening and clarification. Many activities can be adjusted this way, assigning roles or tasks to be sure that all learners can participate and succeed.

Task: Plan mixed-level activities.

Imagine you are planning mixed-level practice activities for the health lesson on making a doctor's appointment. Which of the following activities would you choose for your learners? Why?

- Peer Dictation: Learners dictate sentences to each other (e.g., *Can you come in at 4?*)
- Focused Listening: Learners listen to a receptionist and patient negotiate an appointment time.
- Role Play: Learners write and act out conversations about making an appointment.
- Team Project: Learners work in groups to create a pamphlet with contact information on clinics, doctors, dentists, and other health professionals.

³ Groups of learners at the same proficiency level are also referred to as like-ability groups.

⁴ Groups where learners of different abilities work together are also called cross-ability or different-ability groups.

Multilevel Strategy 7

Establish the learners' role in classroom and group management right from the start.

The nature of the multilevel classroom requires that learners take a very active role in classroom procedures. For example, when learners handle the distribution, collection, and storage of materials, the teacher can pay more attention to facilitating instruction.

Team tasks or projects require learners to work together to achieve a common goal. By sharing resources and ideas in mixed-level groups, learners gain valuable cooperative, group management and communication skills that can be applied in the workplace, community, and within the family.



The team project allows for maximum learner involvement and choice in the learning process. Team members choose roles that best meet their abilities and goals.

In addition, during group work, learners need to take on roles to ensure the successful completion of the group task. Posting a chart with the following roles provides you with an instant reference each time you group learners.

ROLE	TASK
Leader	Read the directions or questions to your group. Help your group work together.
Timekeeper	Watch the time. Give your group a 1-minute warning.
Supplier	Get the supplies for the activity. Collect the supplies when the activity is over.
Recorder	Write the group's ideas. Write neatly.
Reporter	Tell or show the class your group's ideas.
Researcher	Look up words in the dictionary or look for information online.
Language Monitor	Remind everyone to speak English.
Artist	Draw your group's ideas or look for pictures online or in magazines.

When assigning roles to learners, it may be easier for the group to have a higher-level learner take the roles of recorder and reporter, but it is possible for lower-level learners to be group leaders as long as they are provided with the language they'll need to run the group well. (See the section on *Do/Say* charts, p. 16)

Reflect On...

Multilevel Strategies
1-7

Think about and answer these questions in your teaching journal:

Which of these strategies could be useful no matter which type of class you were teaching? Why?
Which multilevel strategies have you already applied in your classes? Which would you like to try?