

A-Z of teaching young learners: Mixed abilities

What and why?

Children bring different experiences and expectations with them to school. They will have different expectations about learning and classroom behaviour. It is likely, then, that even from the start, there will be differences in approach, attitude, aptitude and ability in the English language classroom. The larger the class, the greater these differences may appear, and because of these differences we cannot expect that all the children will be interested in or able to do the same tasks in the same way at the same time. It is important not to confuse the two aspects of 'ability': ability in English, and ability to learn. A poor ability in English does not mean that, with the right support, the child does not have the ability to learn. Many teachers talk about a child's aptitude to language learning. In fact, aptitude to language learning is probably the least significant factor in classroom language learning. If a person has learned one language, they can learn another. It is a child's aptitude to specific ways of being taught that is the key here. A child's poor rate of learning may therefore say more about what is happening in the classroom than it does about the child.

Practical ideas

- Apparent differences in ability are often not differences in ability at all. They may be connected to differences in motivation.
- Not all children will work or learn at the same pace. It is useful to have extra puzzles or exercises ready for those children who finish a task before the others. These can be written by the children – when they have completed an exercise, particularly in the Activity Book, they can create another similar exercise for other children. They can write the answers on the back and place it in a Puzzle Box. Children can take a puzzle or exercise from the Puzzle Box to complete while they are waiting.
- Particularly in large classes, it is important to have regular personal contact with the children. This will help you find out if they are keeping up with the rest of the class. Giving extra personal help to children when they first experience difficulties can stop bigger problems developing later.
- At the end of a unit, you can allow time for the children to sit in small groups and go through what they have learned. You could form groups to make sure that some of the less able children are placed with the more able.

- Some children prefer to learn by writing and drawing. Others prefer to learn by handling objects. Where possible, allow children opportunities to practise new language with objects – perhaps Lego bricks, models of animals, toy cars, etc.
- Encourage children to bring items or ideas from home, which link in with the units. Perhaps these can be displayed on a special table or window sill in class. Children who may not feel confident about expressing themselves may prefer to show something.
- The aim is to help all children feel confident about language learning, so it is better to wait until the individual child is ready before pushing them to speak or act out a drama in English.