

Mixed-level teaching is the thorn in the flesh (and the normal condition) of most teachers these days. How can we help all our students individually within the constraints of keeping a group working together?

In a topic-based syllabus, even one that simply focuses on the topics in a coursebook, the teacher can complement core materials using different reading or listening texts at a higher or lower level

passive form. Text A is for weaker students. The vocabulary load is restricted, the text is shorter, and the sentence construction is simpler. Text B is for stronger students. The vocabulary load is challenging, the text is longer, and the sentence construction is more complex. Whichever text students use, the verbs and their forms are the same, so whole-class feedback is easy.

The 'Cinema Dialogue' (next page) contains examples of functional language, and the start of a task sheet which focuses on numbering the lines in which the functional language occurs.

Dialogue A (lower level) contains:

- basic functional language (close to the task sheet prompts)
- fairly standard English
- short utterances

Dialogue B (higher level) contains:

- more complex functional language
- more idiomatic English
- longer utterances

Since the line numbering result is the same for all, whole-class (or answer key) feedback is ideal, after which the class can split into As and Bs again to practise reading the different dialogues aloud.

Mixed-level tasks

Bill Bowler and Sue Parminter offer a practical approach to mixed-level teaching.

for stronger or weaker students. These graded texts can be authentic materials, supplementary ELT materials written in graded English, or materials adapted by the teacher on a word processor.

Multi-level tasks keep the class working together by giving the whole class related texts at different levels according to their receptive ability. Everyone is then involved in a version of the same reading or listening task. There are two basic types:

● **Tiered text activities** produce the same or similar results for all students, leading to whole-class feedback. (Imagine tiers in a theatre, each with a view of the stage. You don't have to climb much to get to the bottom tier. Texts with a low level of challenge are ideal for weaker students. You have to climb a long way to get to the top tier. Texts with a high level of challenge are ideal for stronger students.)

● **Bias text activities** produce complementary results for student pairs leading to student-student feedback. (Imagine taking two groups of swimmers to the beach. Strong swimmers can go anywhere along the beach. Weaker swimmers feel safer swimming within the area patrolled by lifeguards.)

Tiered text activities

'The Bermuda Triangle' is a tiered text activity for reading and controlled grammar practice. Students read the text in order to decide whether the verbs should go into the active or the

THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE

STUDENT A

From 1945 to the present day, more than one thousand people have disappeared in the area of the 'Bermuda Triangle'. In the days of sailing ships, some people believed that ships in this area

- (a) (destroyed) by sea monsters.
Other people
(b) (think) that the disappearances
(c) (cause) by something else.

STUDENT B

From 1945 to the present day, more than a hundred ships and planes have disappeared in the 'Bermuda Triangle' area, but the 'Bermuda Triangle' is not just a recent phenomenon. In the days of sailing ships, people believed that ships in this area

- (a) (destroyed) by something terrible.
Some people
(b) (think) that the disappearances
(c) (cause) by devils.

Extracts from a tiered text reading and grammar practice activity

Mixed-level tasks



Bias text activities

'The Red Cross' is a bias text task sheet with two related texts. In version A (for weaker students) the vocabulary load is restricted, the text is shorter, and the sentence construction simpler. In version B (for stronger students) the vocabulary load is challenging, the text is longer, and the sentence construction more complex. Neither A nor B students are able to answer all the questions by simply reading their own text. The activity therefore ends in student-student collaboration where students work in AB pairs to pool their knowledge. (It is also a good idea to give students the chance to check answers in AA and BB pairs prior to AB collaboration.)

'The Life of a Teenage Girl' shows a bias text jigsaw listening task. Since the answers to both listening exercises are complementary, feedback in student-student pairs is ideal, with the teacher monitoring to ensure that correct information is exchanged.

Monologue A (for weaker students):

- is shorter
- contains explicit information in the task sheet order

Monologue B (for stronger students):

- is longer (with more irrelevant information for students to filter out)
- contains red herrings, (something weaker students find hard) eg the grandparents are mentioned, though they are not part of the family living at home
- contains implicit information, eg *school starts at 8.30 and we have to leave at 7.30* (weaker students would listen out for the phrase 'one hour', as given on the task sheet)
- contains information out of task sheet order

NB Many teachers do not have two cassette players and separate classrooms where they can play two tapes simultaneously. However, a jigsaw listening task can be organised sequentially on topic-based lines with one cassette player. While group A students listen to their tape in one corner of the class, group B students work on a topic-related activity in the other. Later the two groups swap, so that group B students listen to their tape, and group A works on the topic-related activity.

CINEMA DIALOGUE

Dialogue A

- Kate: 656 8975.
- Adam: **Hello.** Adam here.
- Kate: Oh, hello Adam!
- Adam: Erm ... **Would you like to come to the cinema with me tonight?**
- Kate: Erm ... **No thanks.**
- Adam: **Oh, please. There's a great film on at the Odeon Three. Tarzan. I know you'll love it. You like cartoons, don't you?**
- Kate: Look, **I'm sorry,** but not tonight.

Dialogue B

- Kate: 656 8975.
- Adam: **Hi.** Adam here.
- Kate: Oh, hi Adam!
- Adam: Erm ... **Do you fancy coming to the cinema with me tonight?**
- Kate: Erm ... **Thanks, but no thanks.**
- Adam: **Oh, come on. There's a brilliant film showing at the Odeon Three. Tarzan. I know you'll enjoy it. You're into cartoons, aren't you?**
- Kate: **Look, I'm afraid** I can't come out tonight.

TASK

Match the **bold words** in the telephone dialogue with these functions:

Numbered line	Functions
...line 7.....	a apologising (saying sorry)
.....	b asking for explanation (asking why)
.....	c explaining (saying why)

Extract from a function labelling task sheet

THE RED CROSS

- Who started the Red Cross?
- Which armies fought at the battle of Solferino?
- What did the Swiss businessman do after the battle?

STUDENT A: A short history

When the idea of the Red Cross began, two armies were fighting in Solferino – a town in Italy. After 16 hours of fighting, many soldiers lay dead or dying on the battlefield. Henry Dunant (1828-1910), a Swiss businessman who was visiting Solferino, saw the suffering of these soldiers and organised aid for them.

STUDENT B: The history of the organisation


The International Red Cross fights war and starvation around the world. But how did it all start?

The idea of the Red Cross began on 24 June 1859. At that time, the French and Austrian armies were fighting in Solferino – a town in the north of Italy. After hours of fighting, 4,000 soldiers lay dead or dying on the battlefield.

A Swiss businessman who was visiting Solferino at the time was horrified by the suffering of these soldiers. He decided to help, and immediately organised aid for the wounded – assisted by the people from nearby villages.

Extract from a bias text reading activity

Multi-level activities are not by any means the only solution to the problems of mixed-level teaching, but we hope that by giving specific examples, we can stimulate teachers to

produce some materials of their own which will alleviate some of the difficulties – until the day when they are automatically built into every coursebook. 

THE LIFE OF A TEENAGE GIRL

	Noriko		Miranda
Type of home	<input type="checkbox"/>	flat	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	house	<input type="checkbox"/>
Number of rooms	<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>
Number of people living in family home	<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>
Time/get up	<input type="checkbox"/>	06.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	07.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	07.30	<input type="checkbox"/>
Time/school starts	<input type="checkbox"/>	08.30	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	09.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	09.30	<input type="checkbox"/>
Time/journey to school	<input type="checkbox"/>	10 mins	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	30 mins	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	1 hour	<input type="checkbox"/>
Who does the housework?	<input type="checkbox"/>	mother	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	father	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Noriko	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Miranda	<input type="checkbox"/>

Monologue A Tapescript – Miranda, a teenage British girl

I live in a terraced house in Croydon. Our house has got seven rooms including the kitchen and the bathroom. I live with my mum and dad and my brother and sister. Most of us get up at about 7.30. My mum gets up earlier than the rest of us. She leaves for work at 8 o'clock. We have breakfast with my dad. He doesn't

have a job at the moment. We have to be at school at 9 o'clock. Dad drives us to school. It takes about 10 minutes to get there. After that he goes shopping or does the housework and gets food ready for the evening. In the afternoons and at weekends I help dad with the housework.

Monologue B Tapescript – Noriko, a teenage Japanese girl

I live in a small flat in the suburbs of Tokyo. I live with my parents and my sister. My grandparents live in the country. We'd like them to live with us, but they don't want to. They say Tokyo's crowded and dirty. It's true, it's more crowded than London I think, but it's not as dirty as English cities. Our flat has only got three rooms. My sister and I sleep, eat, do our homework and watch TV in the same

room. That's normal in Japanese cities. Houses in the country are bigger than this. In the morning we all get up at 6 o'clock. My sister and I take the train to go to Junior High School. School starts at 8.30 and we have to leave home at 7.30. My father works in the centre of Tokyo. My mother is a housewife. She goes shopping every day, cleans the house and cooks all our meals.

Tapescripts and bias text jigsaw listening

TALKBACK!

I would like to refer to mutual supervision, described by Mario Rinvoluceri in ETp Issue Ten, which he also presented in a workshop.

Many of us found the idea really appealing, as teaching can be a lonely job and we often long for an opportunity to talk about our problems and successes in a non-threatening, non-competitive situation. However, in the practice part of the workshop, many of us had problems with empathetic listening in the role of the supervisor. Even if we did listen carefully, we found it hard to detach ourselves from our experience enough to step into the other person's shoes and look at the situation from her point of view. Mario suggested observing the person's breathing, pace, silences, gestures, posture, etc, as important indicators of the person's attitude and emotional state. This information was useful as feedback, and the activity helped us focus.

In *The Tao of Coaching* by Max Landsberg (McKinsey & Company Inc), I found another method of organising feedback called GROW – Goals, Reality, Options and Wrap-up. The feedback gives simple questions to help pinpoint the problem areas, to brainstorm, evaluate and choose solutions, and to take decisions on a course of action.

The author offers an inventory of questions for each topic, eg:

Goals *What do you want to achieve?*

How will you know you have achieved it?

Reality *What is it like now? What makes you think so? What do you feel about it? What have you done about it so far?*

Options *What do you think can be done? Would you like to hear my ideas? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each solution? Which of the ideas seems best in your situation?*

Wrap-up *When are you going to start?*

What will you do, step by step? What kind of help will you need and when?

When I used 'GROW', people receiving feedback came up with solutions I would have been too reticent to suggest. It has proved successful outside teacher training, too. Good listening, and asking the right questions, is worth more than a bucketful of advice, not only in teaching and training, but in all aspects of life.

Małgorzata Matysik
Warszawa, Poland



Bill Bowler and Sue Parminter have taught English as a foreign language and trained English teachers in Belarus, Britain, Canada, Hungary, Italy and Spain. Their latest publication is *Network*, a three-level topic-based course for young teenagers published by OUP.