Key messages to facilitate teaching and learning for multi-level English language learners

An increasing number of secondary school teachers, including ESOL specialists, are teaching multi-level classes with English language learners (ELLs) ranging widely in their English language proficiency, from the English Language Learning Progressions Foundation to Stage 3. Sometimes these students will also vary in ages. In smaller rural schools, multi-levelling may be the only provision option; in larger schools it may relate to budgetary and/or timetabling constraints. Multi-level classes present considerable challenges for teachers and learners, but they also provide opportunities for collaboration and individualisation, as we strive for learner engagement and achievement of individual educational goals.

Individual appropriate needs assessment to ascertain ELLs’ language strengths and needs as well as their interests and aspirations is essential to inform teaching and learning in all classes. In multi-level contexts, this will inform collaborative and individual responses.

Some important aspects to consider:

- **Individualisation** allows students some freedom to choose the context and content in which they will develop their English skills.
- **Thematic planning** facilitates differentiation for ELLs.
- **Approaches and strategies** exemplifying ESOL Principle 3 - Maintain and make explicit the same learning outcomes for all the learners - can be incorporated into lesson planning for multi-level classes to facilitate comprehensibility and the active involvement of ELLs at all ELLP stages.
- **Grouping** works well in multi-level settings. ELLs may be grouped in pairs, in groups at similar English language stages or across stages, or in teams.

**ESOL Principles**

- Know your learners – their language background, their language proficiency, their experiential background.
- Identify the learning outcomes including the language demands of the teaching and learning.
- Maintain and make explicit the same learning outcomes for all the learners.
- Begin with context-embedded tasks which make the abstract concrete.
- Provide multiple opportunities for authentic language use with a focus on learners using academic language.
- Ensure a balance between receptive and productive language use.
- Include opportunities for monitoring and self-evaluation.