A dying father in a Vietnamese folktale called his 10 children to his bedside. Handing the oldest son a stick of wood, the father invited him to break it. The son did so quite easily. Then the father handed him a bundle of 10 sticks and asked him to do it again. This time, no matter how hard the son exerted himself, he could not break even one of the sticks. The bundle remained intact. “Work together,” the father advised his children, “and nothing can defeat you.” This wise man wanted his family to understand the strength that flows from unity.

The benefits and advantages of unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity are what this book is all about. Multilevel classrooms—also known as mixed-ability or heterogeneous classrooms—are a fact of life in English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs around the world. They are often not only multilevel but also large, multilingual, and multicultural. For this reason, in this book we as coeditors approach multilevelness not solely as a technical issue involving instructional methods, classroom management, tasks, activities, and curriculum, though it certainly involves all of these (Baurain, 2005, 2007; Bell, 2004; Hess, 2001; Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006; J. Rose, 1997). Rather, we approach the phenomenon of multilevelness from a holistic and humanistic perspective; our conception includes diversity not only in language skills and proficiencies, but also in learning styles, purposes, and contexts, including the sociocultural influences of ethnicity, gender, and other elements involved in the formation and development of learner and teacher identities (Phan, 2008). These and other factors contribute to the complexity and challenge of how we as teachers define and respond to groups of multilevel students.

By taking a more flexible and open-ended approach to the main topic of this volume, we are building bridges to work being done elsewhere in education (e.g., Hamann & Reeves, 2008; Schultz, 2003). We are also resisting the tendency of ESOL professional discourse to sound impersonal and mechanistic, as if we were programming language learning machines rather than working with people. Language acquisition is by no means as linear or predictable as a chemical reaction. Our stance prefers to embrace the inherent “messiness” of the learning process (see also Allwright, 2005; Oxford, Massey, & Anand, 2005).
It has been truthfully said that “all classes are mixed ability classes” (J. Rose, 1997, p. 3). Even when good placement tests or systems are in place, diversity among learners is inevitable. How are committed and creative teachers responding to this reality and benefiting their students? The chapters in this book represent answers from current classroom practice in a variety of settings. To make the contents applicable in other contexts—that is, transferable or generalizable in a broad sense—we are depending on dynamic reader interaction. You are the best judge of what is useful and relevant, and how and why, in your specific situation. In a sense, the father in the Vietnamese folktale had the easier job of pronouncing wisdom and passing on; it was the children left behind who had the harder task of putting his words into practice. We coeditors and chapter contributors will eventually close this volume and ride off into the sunset, as it were. It will be you who decide what to do, and how and why, with the bundle of sticks we offer here.

Multilevel and Diverse Classrooms is one volume in TESOL’s Classroom Practice Series, one bundle of sticks within a larger bundle of sticks. As do the other volumes in the series, this book follows a consistent chapter template:

- Introduction
- Context
- Curriculum, Tasks, Materials
- Reflections

This structure helps unify the series as a whole and the chapters within this individual book, yet by scanning the table of contents one can see the great diversity in topics, contexts, and approaches. A variety of types of classrooms from around the world are also represented in this volume, including 4-year university, community college, P–12, teacher education, and adult education.

One additional note on this volume’s approach to unity, diversity, and the multifaceted nature of teaching and learning ESOL concerns the presentation of contributors’ names, including our own. The first coeditor’s name is presented in the correct order, with family name (Baurain) last. The second coeditor’s name is also presented in the correct order, with family name (Phan) first. Most chapter authors’ names are listed in the same manner as the first coeditor, while the authors of chapter 14 are listed in the same manner as the second coeditor. Getting names right, we believe, is a small but important step toward achieving the kind of multilevel and diverse classrooms in which all of us can truly enjoy teaching and learning.

**STANDING BEFORE A SEA OF FACES 🌊**

This section groups four chapters set in contexts in which the ESOL classes are not only multilevel but also large (Hess, 2001; LoCastro, 2001). Chapter 2,
“Responding to the Challenge of Large Mixed-Ability Classes in China,” by Alan Seaman, takes up the question of whether and how communicative and student-centered teaching principles formulated in one context (smaller classes, Western cultures) can be put into practice in other contexts (larger classes, non-Western cultures). Seaman narrates a sabbatical semester in China and critiques his pedagogical adaptations from a sociocultural and pragmatic perspective.

Chapter 3, “Large Classes and Group Projects: A Curriculum Unit on Tourism in the Philippines,” by Doris H. Christopher and Roland A. Niez, is a multifaceted and multilayered account of project work, which is often recommended as a fruitful curricular approach within mixed-ability settings. The authors keep a variety of issues in focus and in balance, including small-group configurations, presentation and research skills, interpersonal dynamics, and motivating high- and low-proficiency learners alike.

Chapter 4, “Speaking in Crowds: Oral Activities for Large Classes With Few Resources,” by Susan Donnelly Renaud, Elizabeth Tannenbaum, and Michael Jerald, is based on teacher training in Haiti and other environments where material classroom resources are scarce. The authors ask themselves, “What is a successful speaking activity?”, and go on to craft guiding principles to answer this question for large multilevel classrooms and share five of their most productive activities.

Chapter 5, “Every Student Wins: Using ‘Team English’ With Large Multilevel Classes in Thailand,” by Marguerite G. MacDonald and Ian L. Smith, describes a model based on a sports metaphor, right down to color-coded uniforms and a friendly spirit of competition. This model, which has been piloted and developed on the ground in Thailand, is a fresh take on small-group strategies that have long been employed in response to the challenge of multilevel classrooms. I (Brad) saw a demonstration of “Team English” at a recent Thailand TESOL Convention; the hundred or so participating teachers who jammed the room and left more excited than I have ever seen any group leave any conference session attest to the potential and success of this program.

### SPURRING CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

This section includes five chapters that share an emphasis on visual and artistic resources. Chapter 6, “Go to Commercial: Using Television Commercials in Multilevel EFL Classrooms,” by Frank Tuzi, Ann Junko Young, and Keiko Mori, discusses the effective use in mixed-ability environments of a widely available authentic form of text from the popular media: television commercials. The authors argue that these advertisements “provide not only jumping-off points for learning discrete linguistic and lexical items, but also an avenue for exploring culture and values” (p. 77).

Chapter 7, “Photography as a Cultural Text for Language Learning,”
by Walter Gene Pleisch and Joel See, begins with the anthropological and sociological tradition of photography as a research tool or means of gathering cultural artifacts and turns it into a language learning experience. The narrated project combines listening, speaking, reading, writing, collaborative learning, creativity, critical thinking, and environmental awareness.

Chapter 8, “iDeas for iPods in the Multilevel Language Classroom,” by Troy Cox, Robb Mark McCollum, and Benjamin L. McMurry, taps into the contemporary phenomenon of MP3 players and considers how they might be used to meet language learning objectives. The authors’ classroom-tested suggestions encompass taking advantage of these devices’ audio, video, and text capabilities as well as using them for Web browsing, digital voice recording, and podcasting.

Chapter 9, “Teaching Smart, Using Art: Creativity at Work in Mixed-Ability Classes,” by Linda M. Holden, highlights how and why stimulating learners’ imaginations can benefit their language learning. The flexibility of her ideas for multilevel learners is demonstrated by means of two activities, one featuring a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip and the other a Norman Rockwell painting.

Chapter 10, “Online Comics: Writing, Reading, and Telling Stories in English,” by Bill Zimmerman, features an online comics creation Web site that was also reviewed recently in Essential Teacher (Kirson, 2008). Using a library of characters, speech bubbles, and other tools created especially for literacy and ESOL programs, learners are invited to write and design their own comic strips. I (Brad) recall the first time I used this Web site with students in an intensive English program: In the computer lab, I handed out the assignment sheet, and students began to familiarize themselves with the site’s resources. After several minutes, I also handed out a sample strip that involved a student’s unbelievable excuse about undone homework and the teacher’s humorous response. Students began chuckling, and the atmosphere lightened. It seemed as though my example freed them to write “something real.” All around the room I saw cooperative learning and peer editing in English. They really wanted to get it right, and they took pleasure in e-mailing their comics to family and friends. Their pride of accomplishment was palpable—one shy student even suggested I gather the class’s creations in a comic book and present it to the program director (which I did).

EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES

This section comprises six chapters that open up a typical definition of multilevelness to include more kinds of diversity than simply linguistic. Chapter 11, “Culturally Responsive Teaching in a Colorful Classroom,” by Roby Marlina, discusses how culturally responsive teaching, a concept typically associated with multicultural education, can be a pedagogically appropriate orientation within a multilevel language classroom. The discussion revolves around a practical classroom activity involving color associations and stereotypes.
Chapter 12, “Unity and Diversity in a Theology Class: Learning English for Academic Reading and Writing,” by Iris Devadason, is set within the under-studied context of seminary ESOL or theological English as a branch of English for specific purposes. Devadason presents a nuanced understanding of how “students training in theology in a mixed-ability English class in India need to work together from the start of their careers in order to foster a sense of oneness, participation, and peaceful cooperation” (p. 132–133).

Chapter 13, “Teaching With Students: Effective Instruction in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Classrooms,” by Karla Garjaka, explicitly expands the idea of multilevel classrooms to include multiple forms of cultural and linguistic diversity, which she regards not as barriers but as valuable resources. Garjaka, originally from Brazil and now working in a large midwestern U.S. city, includes numerous practical teaching tips that flesh out a model built on respect, comfort, understanding, and interaction.

Chapter 14, “Minds Working Together: Scaffolding Academic Writing in a Mixed-Ability EFL Class,” by Le Van Canh and Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh, takes a sociocultural perspective on meeting the demands of academic writing in a foreign language: “If learning how to produce writing that satisfies academic norms is the problem from a student’s perspective, from a teacher’s perspective the challenge is to prepare students with varying English proficiencies and from non-English-speaking cultural and academic backgrounds to become flexible writers who can effectively tackle academic writing tasks from a variety of angles” (p. 150). The authors explore various forms of scaffolding and report on the most effective strategies.

Chapter 15, “Self-Access Language Learning: Accommodating Diversity,” by Garold Murray, connects the literature on multilevel classrooms and self-access language learning, as seen concretely in one center established in a northern Japanese city. Conceptualizing the center as one form of a community of practice, Murray explains a philosophy and structure that enable and empower an incredibly multilevel and diverse group of learners.

Chapter 16, “Building a Community of Mixed-Ability Learners: Connect, Network, Empower,” by Jo Bertrand, gives an inside perspective on two Chinese classrooms, one for nuclear engineers and one for secondary school English teachers. Faced with varying language proficiencies and professional statuses as well as a cross-cultural (teacher–student) learning situation, Bertrand developed an approach to task design that gave participants adequate help and freedom or space, guidance without domination, and confidence to work together to meet their language learning goals.

We are pleased to present this bundle of sticks to you as readers, and we are grateful to TESOL for allowing us and the contributors to add to the growing knowledge base of classroom practice in language education. We hope that this volume and the Classroom Practice Series as a whole will be an encouragement
and help to you as you continue to create and collect your own bundles of sticks. Teachers who value professional development and diversity are indeed teachers who thrive in multilevel or mixed-ability classrooms and who understand the strength that flows from unity.

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