

Understanding our learners: Effective techniques for diverse learners

Webinar handout

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Session content

1. Understanding our learners.
2. What is differentiation?
3. Why is it important?
4. How do we do it? / What are effective techniques?
5. Key Points.
6. Resources for future reading.

1. Understanding our learners

Our learners may differ in terms of:

- Language proficiency.
- Motivation
- Educational, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- Age and gender
- Support systems
- Interests
- Any special educational needs
- Level of autonomy

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- Personality
 - Preferred ways of learning
 - Etc.

Recommend: [Understanding learners | TeachingEnglish | British Council](#)

No two learners are the same!

A good teacher carefully plans their lessons but they “teach the learners, not the plan”
(Scrivener, 2005, p. 109)

2. What is differentiation?

“... a process by which teachers provide opportunities for pupils to achieve their potential, working at their own pace through a variety of relevant learning activities” Convery (1999).

“one-size-fits-all instruction will inevitably sag or pinch – exactly as single-size clothing”
(Tomlinson, 2001).

Differentiating instruction means “shaking up” what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas and expressing what they learn (Tomlinson, 2013).

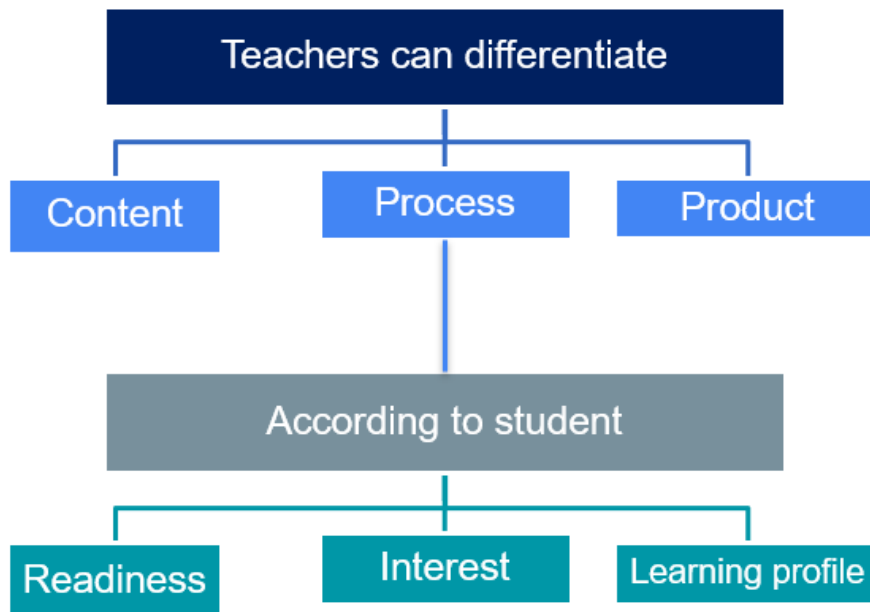
Differentiation is what teachers do to *“meet the individual needs of the students”* (Roberts, 2012).

3. Why is it important?

- The differences are significant enough to make a major impact.
- Even students of same age are different in several aspects.
- Students learn best with enough support to push them slightly beyond the point at which they can work without assistance. (ZPD)
- Students learn best when they can make connection between the curriculum and their personal interest and life experiences.
- Students learn more effectively when classrooms create a sense of community where they feel significant and respected.
- It’s our goal to maximize the capacity of each individual student.

(Tomlinson, 1995, p. 9)

4. How do we do it?



Differentiated instruction graphic organizer (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010)

We can learn about our learners through interviews, surveys/forms, family histories, school histories, observations, assessments, etc.

We can differentiate:

- **Content:** What students learn (e.g. let students choose the topic)
- **Process:** How they learn it and how teachers help them learn (e.g. work alone or in group)
- **Product:** How they demonstrate learning (e.g. choice of assignments/assessments.)

4.1 Differentiating the content in our classroom

- Give Ss choice of topic based on their interest;
- Respond to student feedback and make changes;
- Use multiple forms of input (e.g. realia, videos, demonstrations);
- Vary content based on student level;
- Vary tasks and supports based on student preparedness (word banks, sentence starters) (Tomlinson, 2013).

Sample Activity: Tic-Tac-Toe

Objective: Using the past simple tense to talk about personal experiences.

Describe a past event from your life in 5 sentences (use past simple)	Write 5 sentences using the past simple.	Read a short story past tense and answer 3 questions.
Create a dialogue between two people talking about what they did last weekend.	Write a short paragraph about a holiday you took in the past.	Correct 5 sentences with mistakes in the past simple.
Watch a video about a famous historical event and write 5 sentences summarizing it in the past simple.	Interview a classmate about their last holiday and write 3 things they did.	Describe your last birthday using the past simple.

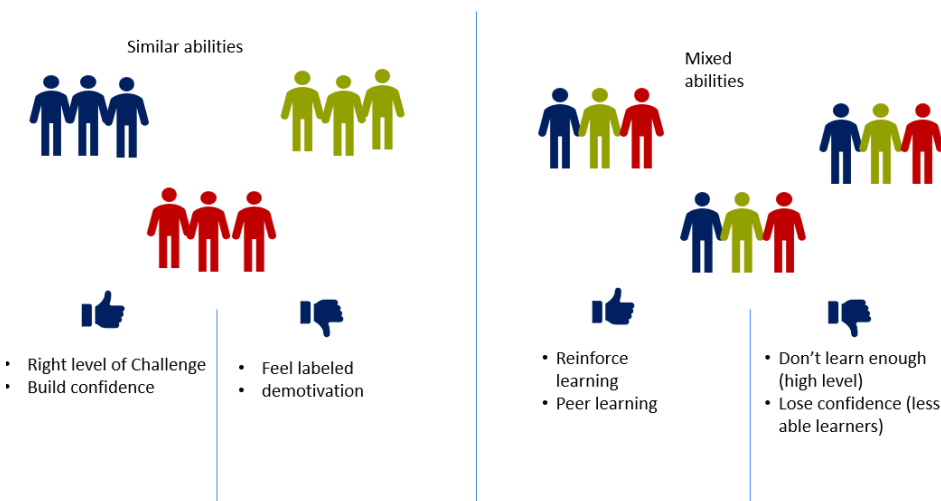
4.2 Differentiating the process in our classroom

- Active learning
- Group or pair work (students can work at their own level; they can support each other and learn from each other.)
- Flexible seating and movement

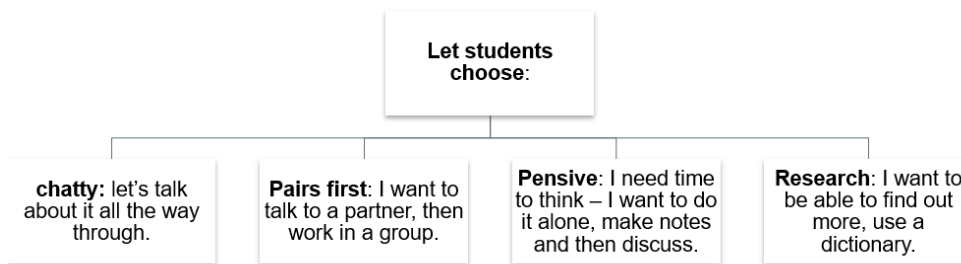
Sample Activity: Grouping strategies

- Ability Groupings
- Personality Groupings
- Random Groupings

Ability groupings



Personality groups?



Random Groupings

- Use random selection tools (e.g. random group generator <https://www.classtools.net/random-group-generator/>)
- Other interesting ways of grouping by:
 - birthday or shoe sizes
 - Line up by height/alphabetical order
 - Number or color cards
 - Puzzles or pieces

4.3 Differentiating the product in our classroom

- Let students choose how to show their learning
- Choice between questions in assessment
- Essay
- Poem
- Oral report/presentation
- Drawing with caption
- Song lyrics
- Next time, they have to choose a different type of product.

Sample Activity: Learning Menu

Instructions:

1. Choose 1 Starter, 1 Main, and 1 Dessert from the menu.
2. Complete the activities by focusing on using the past simple tense to describe personal experiences or events.
3. Be ready to share or present one of your chosen tasks with the class.

Starters (Choose 1)

- Write 5 sentences about what you did last weekend.
- Create a timeline of your last holiday, writing a sentence for each major event using the past simple tense.
- Draw and label a storyboard showing a past event from your life. Write one sentence using the past simple under each picture.

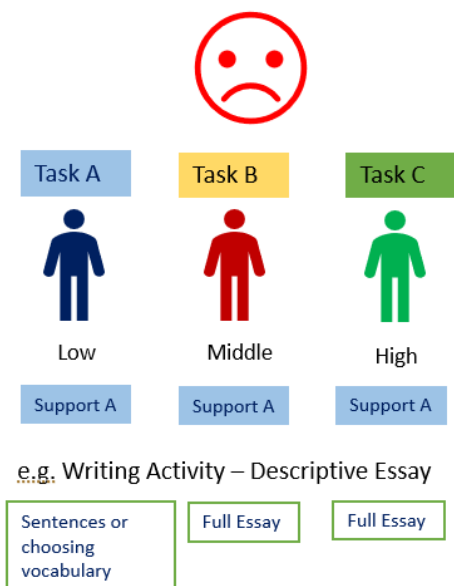
Mains (Choose 1)

- Song lyrics
- Write a short paragraph (5-7 sentences) about a memorable event from your childhood, focusing on the past simple tense.
- Create a dialogue where two people talk about what they did last weekend. Perform it with a partner or write it out.
- Record yourself telling a story about a past experience (1-2 minutes). Use at least 5 sentences in the past simple.

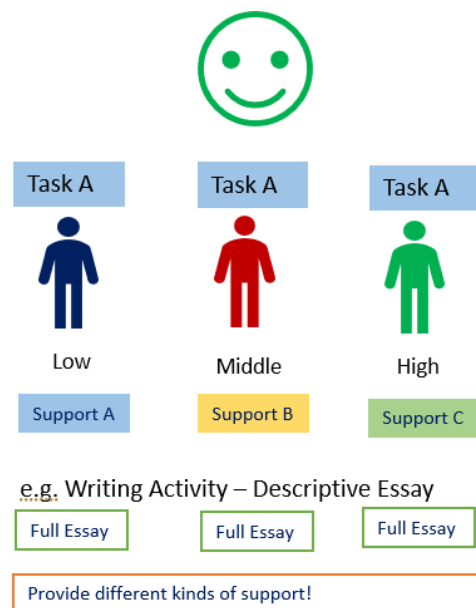
Desserts (Choose 1)

- Song lyrics
- Interview a classmate about their last holiday and write 3 things they did.
- Watch a video about a historical event and write 5 sentences summarizing what happened, using the past simple.
- Correct 5 sentences that have mistakes in the past simple tense.

4.4 Differentiating in terms of support



Widen the gaps and lack ambition for many students.



We can support by:

1) **scaffolding their learning.**

Focus on what our students need to achieve the ambitious goal we set.

e.g. My students will be able to write a 'description essay' if I give them:

- A model essay
- Template
- Idea sheet
- Sentence starter
- Vocabulary list

"Every student in our classroom is working to achieve the same ambitious objective.

But for some students having more resources to help them get there." (Sam Inder, 2024)

2) **Removing cognitive load**

This can be a barrier to learning for our students. For example, writing is a task that usually involves high cognitive load as we need to focus on several aspects: ideas, grammar, purpose, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, handwriting, etc. So, remove any elements that are not important or take away the need to remember them so that they can concentrate on achieving the key learning objective.

"The result is the whole class working on the same high-level task, but with some learners being supported by removing the need to remember the extensive details." (Sam Inder, 2024)

5. Key points

- Set same goal/tasks for every student but with different support.
- No need to plan three different lessons for three students.
- Focus on small changes to add more challenge or more support.
- Repeat tasks: Improve quality
- Do it in different ways or with different partners.

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