Planning for Differentiation- Rachael Roberts- British Council Teaching for Success Online Seminar

Differentiation can be defined as:

"….identifying and addressing the different needs, interests and abilities of all learners to give them the best possible chance of achieving their learning goals."

(Standards Unit, *Improving differentiation in business education, DfES 2004)*

In ELT, differentiation is often referred to as 'teaching mixed ability' or 'mixed levels'. However, students can be different in many different ways, not just ability. And, even more importantly, we need to consider what we mean by ability anyway, as all students have different strengths and weaknesses within their language ability.

No class is ever completely homogeneous, and we all need to be thinking as much as we can about how to meet the individual needs of the students. It is vital to teach the students rather than the lesson plan.

That said, I don't believe in providing different worksheets for all the students and getting them to work on these individually or even in pairs. Unless the class is very small, this just stretches the teacher too thin, and it is often pretty uninspiring for the students as well. Students come to class to interact with each other, and language is ultimately all about interaction.

Let's look at some ways in which we can differentiate without having to spend hours on preparation.

1 Differentiation by outcome

The first thing to remember is that many of the tasks we are already doing will enable us to differentiate quite well. Any task which is open (has more than one acceptable answer or can be approached in different ways) will allow students to work at their own level.

Similarly, any tasks which provide choices or which are personalised or require interaction with others are likely to be naturally quite differentiation-friendly, and will allow for different outcomes.

Some people use differentiated outcomes on their lesson plans. For example:

By the end of the lesson all students will be able to.. most will be able to..some will be able to..

This can be a useful reminder that what we teach is not necessarily what is learnt, but, personally I am not hugely keen on this approach, as it starts the lesson by assuming that some students cannot achieve. The point is to provide options, not to limit them.

2 Differentiation by task.

We can provide students with these options by 'tweaking' tasks so that we provide either extra support, or extra challenge. The table below gives some examples:

Activity Type	Extension activities	Support strategies
Reading	Select 3 new items of vocabulary, look them up in their dictionaries and write them up on the board, with definitions. Write 3 questions about the text. These can then be given to another early finisher to answer and then passed back to the original student for marking.	Pre-teach vocabulary students will need to do the task and leave it on the board. Activate their previous knowledge of the topic before reading. Give students the answers in a jumbled order, with a few distractors. Make open questions multiple choice. Break the text into sections with questions after each section and give the option of only reading 1 or 2 sections.
Listening	When students listen for the second time to confirm their answers, give some optional extra questions as well. When taking answers on a true/false activity, ask why/why not?	Pre-teach vocabulary and activate knowledge as above. Give students a chance to discuss answers before feeding back to the class. Monitor and play again if necessary. Give students the tapescript on second listening. In a gap-fill, provide some of the words needed.
Writing	Make use of creative tasks that students can do at their own level. Use a correction code to give students a chance to self	Give a model or example before they start writing. Correct the draft with the student or in pairs before rewriting.

	correct. Increase the word limit.	Reduce the word limit.
Speaking	Ask students to justify their opinions Pair higher level students together so they can really stretch themselves.	Give students time to rehearse or plan their ideas. Pair weak and strong together. Elicit and practise the language they will be using beforehand

3. Differentiation by teaching method

AS mentioned in the table above, an activity which involves active learning and group or pair work is likely to differentiate more effectively because

– Students can work at their own level.

– Students can support each other and learn from each other.

Most of us have experimented with putting stronger students with weaker ones and, it has to be said, the results can vary quite a bit. Sometimes it works really well. The stronger student consolidates their knowledge by explaining to the weaker student and the weaker student feels supported.

Sometimes, however, the stronger student dominates or resents the role and/or the weaker student feels embarrassed or says nothing.

Mixing things up so that the same pairings aren't used all the time certainly helps, but there are also some techniques you can use, such as Scribe, which I first saw in Jill Hadfield's excellent book, Classroom Dynamics. When carrying out a small group discussion, appoint a scribe, or note taker for the group. They should only listen and take notes. After the discussion, they will feed back to the whole class.

If the strongest student is the scribe, this will prevent them from dominating, but still give them an important role and a chance to shine at the end. If a weaker student takes this role, the pressure is taken off them to produce language spontaneously, but they can prepare something to say at the end, which will provide a sense of achievement.

Questioning techniques can also be modified to provide better differentiation. Give students enough time and space to answer and nominate, by asking the question before you name the student, so it doesn't always fall back to stronger students. Consider how easy the question is and don't choose students who can't answer. Use monitoring while students are working in pairs or groups to identify who can answer which question.

Ask different types of questions. A useful model is Bloom's mastery and developmental tasks (Bloom's taxonomy) Mastery tasks can be mastered by all learners, they are straightforward - you might ask a learner to describe something or define something. A developmental task is more stretching and requires a deep understanding. These kinds of questions might ask the students to judge or critically appraise for example.

But perhaps the easiest and most effective thing you can do when asking questions is to wait longer for an answer, and discourage the stronger students from jumping in. Just waiting a couple of seconds longer has a huge impact in terms of both the number of students who are willing to answer and in the length and complexity of their answers.

Obviously none of these ideas is going to provide every student in the class with a 1-2-1 tailor-made course. However, I do think they can go some way towards helping to address the different needs, interests and abilities of the learners.

Further Reading

http://esol.britishcouncil.org/methodology/differentiation-esol-classroom

http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=89

http://newteachers.tes.co.uk/content/using-differentiation-mixed-ability-classes

https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-mixed-ability-classes-1

http://www.onestopenglish.com/support/methodology/classroom-management/classroom-management-teaching-mixed-ability-classes/146453.article