

# Differentiating tasks for young learners

Chris Roland and Daniel Barber offer a practical demonstration of how differentiation works.

In our first article in the April edition of *Modern English Teacher*, 'Untangling Differentiation', we examined some basic considerations for incorporating differentiation into our classes, arguing that differentiation is perhaps the most complex aspect of language teaching but is a craft we can practise. This

article offers additional clarification on the subject and provides a practical demonstration of its principles in the young learner class. We have taken a page from the popular Bugs course, published by kind permission of *Macmillan Publishers*, to look at ways we might differentiate this task.

## Aims and evaluation

With every lesson, we need to know what our language aims are. Here the task involves students understanding three main elements: the animal words, the colour words and the opening instructions. This is the common learning goal; how we help each student progress towards that goal, considering and catering for their individual needs, constitutes differentiation. Let's imagine that the average age of our students is six years old.

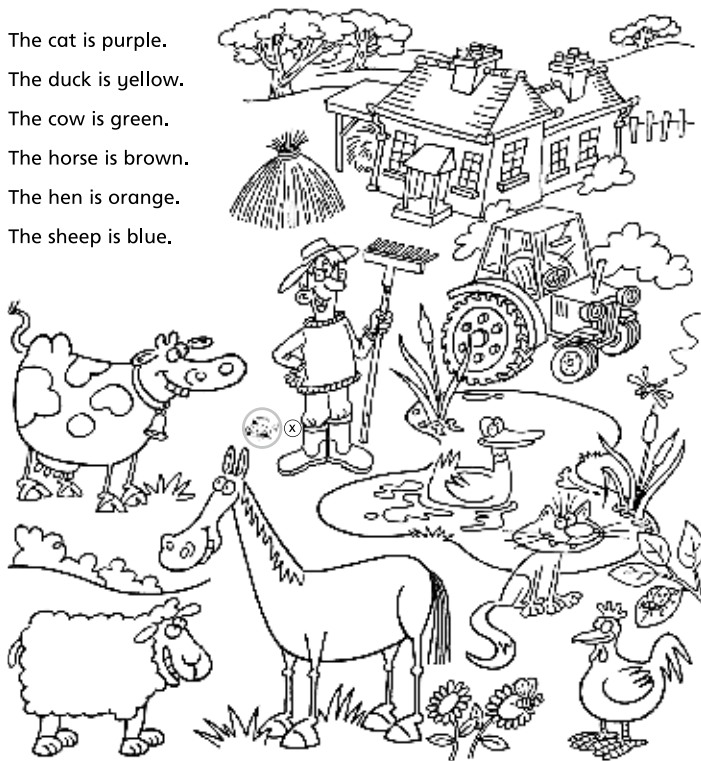
As in our first article, we distinguish between *structured differentiation*, anticipated during the planning stage before the lesson, and the *differentiated support* the teacher can offer as a spontaneous response to what happens as the lesson unfolds.

Before we start talking about struggling learners and advanced learners and how to cater for both, we need to decide who these people actually are and who is where in relation to our learning aims. Here we can draw on three resources: previous knowledge of our students built up over time, our observations of how they perform during the main task and any information we can glean before they start the activity. This task hinges on students' successful recognition of words in print, so a brief checking stage where we show the class word cards of those very same items will give us a good idea of who can already do this task and who will need extra help to manage it. A cursory pre-assessment stage like this will also ground how we group students or assign

## 3 The moon is in the river

### 1 Read and colour.

- The cat is purple.
- The duck is yellow.
- The cow is green.
- The horse is brown.
- The hen is orange.
- The sheep is blue.



- Read and colour the animals. Play a memory game: *The hen is blue./No!*
- Find and circle the busy butterfly with letters of the alphabet on each page as you do Unit 3.

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variations to the main task that we might have designed. Tomlinson (2001) makes the point that effective evaluation is a cornerstone of differentiation. Without it, how can we be sure that we are providing each student with the right amount of support, neither too little or too much?

## Structure for struggling learners

### With classroom resources

There are a number of ways we can plan for differentiated lessons before class. Labelling class sets of crayons allows students to match the labels with the words on the page. We can provide a similar structure for them with the animals, displaying flashcards and word cards together on the board for reference. Or we could offer slightly less help by displaying just the first letter of each word instead of the whole word. We may wish to draw their attention to picture dictionaries at the back of the book. All of these measures will serve those students who, whilst struggling to recognise the language, are still keen to discover and can work, to some extent, independently.

### Demonstrating instructions

A common support technique used by teachers of young learners is to demonstrate the activity in front of the class before handing them the crayons and books. You may also have a completed example of the task ready so that learners can refer briefly to it. More useful perhaps is the idea that trainer and writer Sue Cowley (2013) suggests of the teacher filming themselves completing the task, providing a running commentary as they do so. Struggling students can watch a recording on a laptop or big screen as many times as they need without the teacher needing to drag the whole class through repeated renditions of the task.

### Extension tasks for strugglers

Often it is the advanced learners who get the interesting extension tasks. For a change, and for consolidation, lower-level learners could be asked to recreate the farmyard scene complete with the text, on the whiteboard, on mini-boards or in plasticine, making sure their animals are the correct colours.

## Supporting struggling learners

When students tell us they are stuck, we can start by asking them what *exactly* they find hard about the task. It might just be one or two content words such as 'horse'. It might be all of them. This will give us an extra insight into where they are and the best way to help them.

### With our voice

By reading the instructions to the exercise and the six sentences out loud while indicating with our finger, we help any students who are struggling to match words they recognise when spoken to their printed form. It also emphasises the importance of reading the instructions and focusing on the task for any students who have not yet looked at the task properly.

Another useful support technique is to sound out just the first syllable of the animals and colours. This encourages students to guess the whole word by employing bottom-up processing skills, leading to whole-word prediction. A fun twist is to mouth the words silently, encouraging the students to focus on vocal articulation and to say the words out loud.

### On the page

The teacher can also intervene directly on the page by leaving prompts and clues on a student's copy of the exercise. For example, arrows can be drawn from the lexical items to their corresponding pictures; students will still process each animal word as they start to trace the progress of each arrow. Similarly, a crayon stroke (purple, yellow, green, etc.) can be made underneath each colour word. Both these measures provide support for individual students as and when they need it.

Some students don't enjoy colouring; we can get them tracing the colour round the outer line of each drawing to make the task less arduous for those students but still letting them demonstrate their understanding of the language. More advanced students could be asked to write the colour words in that colour on the correct animals to extend the task. We might also consider this for the colouring-in perfectionists in the class who could do more if they worked faster.

## Monitoring

We do not have to wait until our struggling learners get stuck. The teacher can be pro-active in their support by walking round and checking that students understand the more difficult word items even as they are colouring in, in response to the sentences they do know. This will help spread our support over the lesson and keep things running smoothly.

For students who are finding the reading element of the task very difficult, we can read out the sentences while they follow them with their finger in order to provide aural support to comprehension.

If struggling students have not finished the task, why not allow them to come back to it during the next lesson? This is an example of how we might differentiate time, as a resource in itself, on an individual basis.

## Structure for advanced learners

### On the page

A range of pre-prepared extension tasks for advanced learners might involve altering the six-sentence text in some way, providing students with adapted copies of the worksheet. The words for each sentence can be jumbled up to include a word ordering pre-task (*is cat purple the*) or we might include a focus on spelling by providing anagrams or a 'bad text' that needs correcting: *The kat is perpul*.

The instructions could involve two colours for each animal: *Colour the cat purple and red*. We might introduce different body parts and the genitive 's: *Colour the cat's nose purple*. Or the task could also be used as a vehicle for working with more obscure colours such as *light green, grey or sky blue*.

### Aural delivery of instructions

Another option is for us to vary the medium of delivery for the instructions. Advanced learners could be grouped, then asked to cover the text with a square of card and adhesive tac. They listen to a recording of the teacher reading the text. One student in the advanced

group is put in charge of managing the audio, replaying stretches for the others on request. Along similar lines, one advanced learner could simply read the instructions to the others who have the text covered, or students could be put in pairs with one able to see the first three sentences and one the last three – each student reading out their respective instructions for them both to follow.

### Redesign

Some of these suggestions move us from language reception (listening to or reading the language) to production (reading or writing it), an effective way to extend the task's learning aims. Taking this idea further, advanced learners could be given the same worksheet but with no text; they write their own instructions with different colours (more realistic ones or even more fantastical ones such as gold and silver with stripes and spots). They could be provided with a different line drawing and asked to write instructions to that or given a colour photo and asked to write a simple text describing it.

Moving away from the picture but still working colours and objects, we can give students a grid with six columns – one for each of the colours on the page – and they can go round the class, or the school, making a list of five classroom objects that correspond to each of these colours.

### Differentiated support for advanced learners

Tweaking a task so that it provides more challenge for an advanced learner on the spot is probably the most difficult type of differentiation to provide.

Looking at the bottom of the page we see that there is already a memory task built into the exercise that advanced learners can play ('Play the memory game: *The hen is blue. / No!*'). Another very simple extension task for struggling, mid-range and advanced learners upon completion is for the teacher to say: *Read it to me.* So here again, we move from reception to production. More autonomous students can read the text to each other or indeed record each other giving a talk-through presentation of their picture – with or without being able to see the text, depending on level.

Rather than embarking on a heavily structured extension task, an advanced learner might be asked to add two new items to the six sentences, e.g. *The tractor is red. The house is pink.* These could be provided by the teacher, written into the student's book on an individual basis, or they could be student generated. In a similar vein, the teacher might board a number of plural nouns that appear such as *trees, leaves, hills, bushes* and *windows* and the student asked to generate more sentences but this time using *are*.

We might ask students to generate a conversation between the farmer and the animals in the picture by adding speech bubbles and simple text.

Pairs of students might be provided with a simple script and asked to quiz each other:

**A** *Where is the \_\_\_\_?*

**B** *It's next to the \_\_\_\_?*

**A** *That's correct. / Are you sure?*

Occasionally, because of mixed-nationality parentage for example, we might have a child that has native or native like fluency in our class. A very high level learner could be asked to write a story connecting the animals in the picture: *Once upon a time there was a farm ...*

### The need for differentiation in YL classes

No class is homogenous; even in adult classes, there can be large differences of level and aptitude in specific tasks between students. But groups of young learners exhibit an even wider ranging spread of differing needs, which come to the fore in the planning and execution of lessons. There are a number of reasons for this. Adults are normally grouped by level; children by age. Also, adults are usually more capable of overcoming their particular difficulties that struggling in class, or indeed excelling, can create using their own resources and coping strategies. They are more likely to minimise or even cover up these issues publicly, too, so the problem doesn't affect the rest of the group as much.

Within one group of five-, six- or seven-year-olds, however, there can be wildly

divergent aptitudes, which individuals will have absolutely no reluctance to hide and little awareness of how to deal with without the teacher's support. For these reasons, differentiation becomes a much more pressing issue for teachers of young learners.

We hope that by describing just a few of the many ways a lesson can be differentiated, you can see that there is nothing mysterious about differentiation, and that while complex, it is a craft with a wide range of techniques at its disposal, many of which you will undoubtedly be employing in your lessons already.

### References

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