Differentiation:
Teaching mixed-ability classes

Roger Smith

Mixed-ability

- All groups are mixed ability
- Grouped: age vs. ability
- What you already do intuitively
- Awareness of what you do and why
- You build actions and strategies into the variety and routine of our lessons

Mixed ability

Not just good learners vs. bad learners e.g.

- confident speaker who's not good at writing
- excellent grammar knowledge but doesn't speak
- etc.

Reasons for mixed abilities?

– linguistic ability

– social-cultural background

– educational background

– awareness of learning process

– motivation and goals

– learning styles

– interests

– attention span

– special needs

Differentiation

- Different interpretations – no one correct way
- Potentially a revolution: teacher no longer works with whole group
- A relatively 'soft' version - we open up our teaching to mixed ability levels: 'accommodation'
- Actions and strategies which help students access and synthesise information more effectively
- Practical help

2 key issues:

Coursebook:

- prescriptive and limited
- better things to do in class
- give coursebook exercises for homework

Syllabus:

- Identify **core** language and skills: that ALL pupils need to acquire by the end of the lessons / course

Course overview

Today: Grading tasks

- different tasks, same outcome

- why / how / examples / pros and cons

Next week: Open-ended tasks

- same task, different outcomes

- task-based learning / collaboration with pairwork and groupwork

Course overview

Today: Grading tasks

- different tasks, same outcome
- why / how / examples / pros and cons

Course overview

Today: Grading tasks

- different tasks, same outcome

- why / how / examples / pros and cons

Picture dictation

Graded Activity 1: Picture dictation

What is the aim of this activity?
How does this activity help a mixed-ability class?

- Aim: recycling vocabulary
- Aim: listen for detail
- Provides varied levels of support
- All pupils successful
- All pupils contribute in feedback
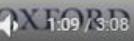- Core skills / language achieved

Traditional dictation

- How can we adapt it for a mixed ability class?

Graded activity 2:

- Grammar practice
- Controlled oral activity
- Free-time activities + present continuous

How could it be graded to different levels?

Provide different levels of support?

Graded tasks

- [Watch](#) (50')

Graded tasks

1. Error correction text
2. Reading for main ideas - scanning
3. Listening for detail
4. Wordsearch – vocabulary recycling

How could you create a graded task for this activity?

Three graded reading activities

1. The Spirit of London

2. Pen Pals

3. Red Cross

How do they help solve multi-ability issues?

Three graded reading activities

1. The Spirit of London:

- First task gives all the answers for support – jumbled for challenge. Weaker students use logic as well as information in text.

- Second task gives multiple choice answers to help average students (in questions 3 and 4 more than 1 correct answer)

- Third task gives open questions – no extra support for strongest pupils

- For all levels of task – answers are the same so plenary feedback is possible

2. Pen Pals:

- First task pupils answer questions about text – for weaker students
- Second task pupils write questions for given answers related to text – for stronger students
- No plenary feedback needed: student-student feedback with pairs created from different tasks
- Weaker students are motivated – they have the answers to the more difficult task

3. Red Cross:

- Text 1: vocabulary load is restricted, text is shorter, simpler syntax
- Text 2: challenging vocabulary, longer text, complex syntax
- Neither students can answer all questions
- Feedback: first 1-1 pair check
- Then 1-2 pair check – pupils collaborate and pool their knowledge

Summary: feedback in graded tasks

Get pupils checking with answers...

- on board

- on projector

- on a handout

- stuck around class on wall

The idea is that nobody knows what anyone else has done so not embarrassed...

Graded tasks – what are the…

Pros?   **Cons?**

Graded tasks

Pros

- All pupils challenged at appropriate level
- Pupils involved
- Pupils can complete the task: motivating
- Cross-level checking empowers weaker pupils
- Encourages co-operation and tolerance

Cons

- More preparation for teacher
- Students may feel labelled as 'weak': demotivated
- Stronger pupils may resent working 'harder'
- Potentially difficult to manage

Graded tasks: solutions

- Graded tasks can be kept and re-used
- Let pupils choose which activity they want to be – keep it lighthearted
- Intervene if some pupils consistently over- or underchallenge themselves
- Group pupils before starting activity, then give out handout so they can't compare
- Clear instructions for regrouping

Next week…

Week 2: Open-ended tasks

- same task, different outcomes
- task-based learning / collaboration with pairwork and groupwork

Thank you for coming!