

Downloadable resource 4:

Differentiation: sliding scale to increase challenge

This resource corresponds to **Chapter 11: Differentiation**.

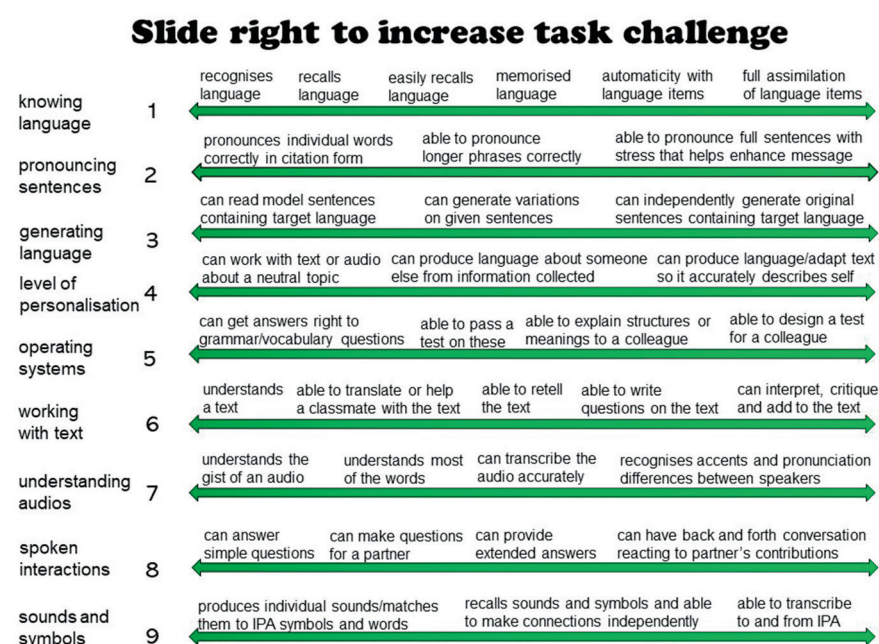
Content

This resource contains the sliding scale diagram as given in **Chapter 11** as well as an example of what using it might look like in the classroom, for each of the nine parameters.

Rationale

Part of successfully differentiating our teaching involves challenging our more advanced learners. However, within the limitations of a busy classroom, it is sometimes difficult to do so, especially when we did expect them to cope with a particular task so easily.

The sliding scale below is meant to act as a guide as to how we might provide those students with a modified activity so that they learn more, relative to their own ability.



About the examples

Many of these examples are on-the-spot adjustments. Some require a little forethought or planning, but I have tried to avoid anything that would require extensive preparation such as detailed and elaborately graded worksheets. We start with what I have called the initial or baseline task on the left and then subsequent moves to the right add challenge. Please bear in mind that the examples of adjustments below are not exhaustive. They are not meant as full lesson plans either. I have also limited myself here, mostly, to discussing task type rather than organisation and logistics, which will vary depending upon the size of your class and school set up.

One: knowing language

If the initial task involves matching thumbnail photos to individual words and phrases, we can move right on the scale and ask those students who have completed this correctly to cover the words and try to recall the items from the pictures. In pairs, they can time each other, repeating this in an effort to reduce their own recall time to as little as possible.

If the teacher has a list of those words in L1, or definition sentences in English or even word prompts consisting of just the first letter or first two letters of each word, students can use this to test each other. In this way we are reducing the prompt and shifting towards memorisation.

To further test students' memory the teacher could say to pairs who have tested each other numerous times and who feel that they know the words, *'Turn over your books. There were 10 words that matched the images. What were they?'*

To help students assimilate how to use target words and to more deeply understand the items, they could be given sentences containing the words and asked to do some detective work, noting down what part of speech each word is (noun, adverb etc) as well as any other details: number (singular or plural) for nouns, or whether it is countable or uncountable, what preposition is taken for verbs or if that verb is followed by infinitive or -ing form, if there is any predictable spelling with similarities to the students' own L1, or conversely if there are any letter combinations that might be tricky.

To practise the items further, students can be asked to prepare a survey consisting of sentence-length questions containing the items. Once checked by the teacher, these could form the basis of a short, informal interview with another student (even with a student who had found the items more challenging and has not prepared their own questions).

Two: pronouncing sentences

Where a set of target sentences have been drilled with the whole class. Those sentences can be copied onto the board or similarly projected and students can try to read through them without making a pronunciation error – in a similar way to the pronunciation challenge activity discussed in **Chapter 15: Getting them talking**. At this point, focus will be upon pronouncing individual words correctly, rather than whole sentence stress.

Those students coping easily with the activity and who are able to read the words one by one can be sent away, in pairs or small groups, with an audio of the sentences. One student can be charged with playing those sentences to their partner/s who have to repeat, trying to mimic rhythm and sentence stress.

To further explore whole sentence pronunciation, students can be provided with a script to the sentences and asked to mark up stressed words using highlighter pens, or simply to underline them, as well as linking words which they feel have become 'squeezed together'. They can be given a final attempt to practise saying the sentences just like the speaker on the audio does before returning to the classroom and perhaps reading their sentences to the teacher who, in the meantime, might have been doing more remedial pronunciation work, at the level of individual sounds and words, with students who found the initial tasks more difficult.

Three: generating language

Where students are presented with a series of sentences containing target vocabulary (a set of nouns such as sports equipment or verbs related to a topic such as air travel), and where they have first dealt with any coursebook related task, they could then be asked to read those sentences to a partner, providing a spoken translation as they do so.

Move towards more original language production and provide students with an entry point into given sentences; they could be asked to read those sentences to a partner but to change a specified number of words (in a similar way to the Another way of saying it... activity detailed in **Chapter 17: Grammar and writing**) but to leave the core vocabulary in place.

For example, if the original sentence was:

*He sometimes wears a **helmet** when he goes for a bike ride.*

Students might produce:

*She absolutely always wears a **helmet** because ice-hockey is very dangerous.*

For a further level of difficulty, and for more original language production, students are asked to say the sentences in a different way, including any core items. So from:

*The plane **took off** two hours late due to bad weather conditions.*

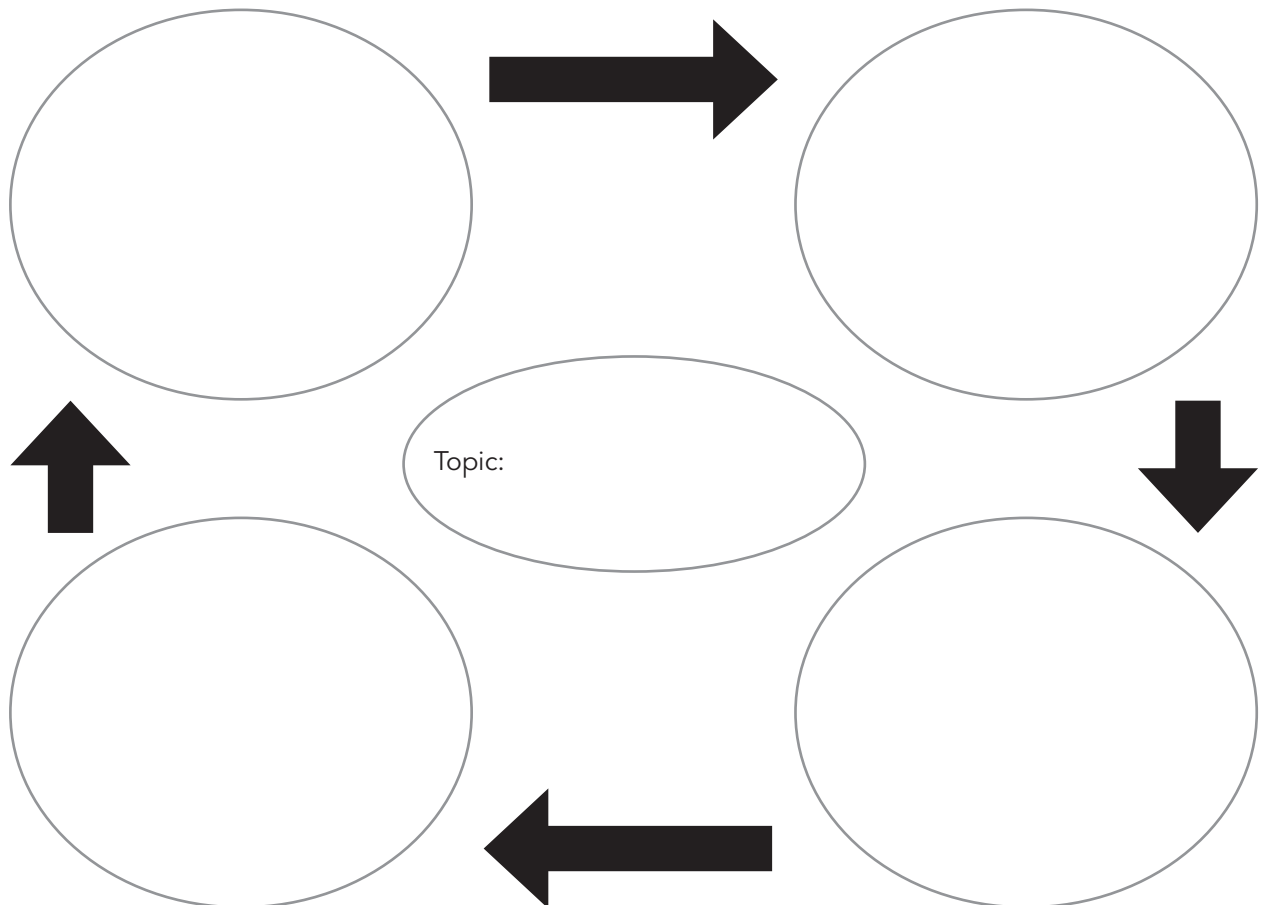
Students might produce:

The aircraft began its journey 120 minutes after the original time because of a storm.

Four: level of personalisation

Many coursebook texts give an account of somebody else's life, experiences or adventures – somebody else's story. Being able to answer comprehension questions on this is the baseline task.

Moving right, to increase the challenge, being able to give their own version of a text by recounting it to a partner will increase a student's sense of ownership of the material. Recounting their version of the text to the teacher on a one-to-one basis also helps personalise, not just the material, but the lesson for them. To this end, students can be tasked with a basic reconstruction activity such as the one covered in the second case study in **Chapter 8: Tidy learning, messy learning and simple clutter** (the schema there is reproduced below), whereby they are asked to record a number of keywords from each paragraph of a text, copying those onto either Post-it notes or into circles on a template.



Using these keywords, they are given time to practise retelling their version of the text before presenting it to the teacher.

We can also move away from reconstruction to a more personalised reaction to a text using prompt questions such as:

1. What can you remember about the text?
2. Was there anything in the text that surprised you?
3. Was the text about the topic you expected it to be when you read the title?
4. Which paragraph did you enjoy reading the most?
5. How many points would you give the text out of ten for being interesting?
6. How long did it take you to read the text?
7. Have you ever read anything similar?
8. Did you learn any new words from the text, if so, what were they?

Finally, we can ask students to prepare their own text, on the same topic, but one that relates to them. In order to do this, students may well need guidance, and this can be provided by some prompt questions that we have previously prepared. Having covered a text about a self-made millionaire who did badly at school before starting her own company and who now heads a charitable foundation, we might provide the following rubric and prompts:

Write a similar text to the one you have worked with – but write about yourself. Use the text as a guide and use these questions to help you:

Paragraph 1

1. *Did you enjoy primary school? Why or Why not?*
2. *Are you getting good marks at school at the moment?*

Paragraph 2

3. *Are you good at working with other people?*
4. *Describe a project that you worked on in a group?*

Paragraph 3

5. *Do you have any future ambitions?*
6. *Would you like to start a company?*
7. *If you did, what type of company would it be?*

Paragraph 4

8. *If you started a charity, who would you help? Why?*

These prompts could equally be given as the basis for a spoken presentation. Every coursebook text has a pattern and central themes that can be extrapolated, tweaked a little and then thrown over to our students to give them the opportunity to generate their own more personally relevant accounts or reactions.

Five: operating systems

The starting point here will normally be an exercise from the book. In the case of a grammar exercise, students can then test each other in pairs or be tested by the teacher, using an exercise where the blanks have not been filled in.

Where a grammar structure has been explained or a summary looked at, students who have coped easily with the initial tasks can be asked to close their books and tell a partner a specified number of things they now know about said structure.

Students can then be put into pairs or groups and asked to design a test that will be used to measure another pair/group's knowledge of the structure studied. Time should be given for writing the test, for them to administer it, correct it and feed back to their tested colleagues.

Six: working with text

Our example for number four also worked with text and everything there will work here. I will provide some additional facets of grading tasks with text.

Obviously understanding the text is our baseline objective. This can be measured by comprehension questions. Rather than the teacher leading the questioning, students can be paired up to ask and answer each other, so they are participating in a fuller conversation about the text.

They could be asked to retell the text in a structured reconstruction exercise using a template as in number four. They could also be asked to turn that reconstruction into a one-minute monologue which they record and send to the teacher.

Another way of retelling the text is to represent it, sentence by sentence, in pictographic form as described in **Chapter 16: Listening and reading**, where I reference the RSA animate series of videos as example. Once the text, or a portion of it, has been represented pictographically, students can then talk others through their illustrations, using those as a prompt for reconstruction, and thus returning full circle to the text.

Another variation on standard comprehension questions that will result in learners engaging more fully with the material is to ask students to write questions on the text themselves. These can be given to classmates and the students who wrote the questions can be charged with assessing their classmates' understanding of the text.

Finally, we can push towards a more critical evaluation of the text. For any textual narrative, we can ask: *What aren't we told?* Learners who have coped easily with the baseline task can write questions for the author of the text that are not answered in the account that they have. They can then swap questions with a partner and try to improvise spoken responses.

Seven: understanding audios

The initial task for listening exercises is usually to answer a set of comprehension questions. I would like to leave those aside in this example and largely deal with use of the audio itself.

To see if our learners have the gist of a recording of a conversation, broadcast or speech, we can play them the first 30 seconds and simply ask: *Who was speaking? What were they talking about? Why were they talking? This Who?-What?-Why?* combination will tell us if they have the gist of what they have heard.

We can then take this further by asking students to tell us five details.

To challenge learners further and test their decoding skills on an intensive level, we can play a short section of two or three sentences, looping back numerous times and ask them to write down every word they hear. This type of intensive micro-listening is covered in **Chapter 16**. In order to maximise the learning potential of such an activity, it is important to revisit difficult stretches with students afterwards, so that they get that chance to actually hear those more elusive words for the first time.

Eight: spoken interactions

Right at the baseline task we can help students answer simple questions by providing sentence stems to use as the starting point to their responses (see **Downloadable resource 17: 100 language stems**).

Giving them a topic and asking our students to prepare questions for a partner, then allowing them to conduct an interview or survey, necessarily entails a greater level of interaction.

Providing students with a topic area and having them ask and answer with a partner after only a minute's preparation, or after no preparation at all, throws them very much back on their own resources and will test the extent to which those resources translate into performance-in-the-now.

To raise the bar further, we can ask students to follow up with a second, third, fourth and even fifth question when they are interviewer (described in the section 'Extending conversations' in **Chapter 15**).

We can also ask learners who are coping with baseline replies very easily to provide extended responses by adapting the question they have been asked, where necessary:

Q: *Do you have a favourite football team?*

A: *No. I don't really like football and so I don't have a team but my sister does. She is absolutely crazy about...*

Another simple way we can ask them to extend responses is to include additional information whenever possible:

Q: *Do you study any other foreign languages apart from English?*

A: *Yes, I study French, three times a week, and we speak quite a lot in class. As well as that, my Hungarian friend is teaching me some words. For example, I know how to say...*

Nine: sound and symbols

Beyond baseline drilling, we can ask learners to start to listen out for where else a modelled sound occurs in a sentence or list of vocabulary. For example:

How many times do you hear /ɜ:/ in this sentence?

Where we have been using the IPA symbols, we can ask students to try to find a given sound on the chart.

The above are two small tweaks we can incorporate into our whole class teaching or as we monitor students on task. Another adjustment that will provide learners who have finished a pronunciation activity with relative ease with something more challenging, is for the teacher to read out loud a word, phrase or sentence from the pronunciation exercise they have just been working on, and then ask them to try to transcribe that into symbols. Care needs to be taken not to over-challenge students by making the task too difficult or being over critical of their efforts.