

Working one-on-one/in small groups make differentiation easy!!??
How goals & simple note taking can remove the chaos
from a chaotic teaching situation.

Classrooms come in all sizes. Differentiating for classes large and small pose similar questions and hurdles. Luckily the solutions can also be the same. There was a time when due to the nature of my job, I prided myself in being a "Queen of Differentiation." As a travelling K-12 ESOL teacher in a pull-out program, my classroom consists of one-on-one or small group settings. Accommodations for various languages, levels of language acquisition, educational backgrounds, economic levels and academic abilities must be made.

This population is fluid and complex. Often there aren't prescribed materials to follow, which can be as advantageous as it is an obstacle. The common threads between students' language ability, readiness level, etc. must be linked with classroom and ESOL curriculum to create language and content goals and objectives. Adjusting for these factors, forces you to differentiate.

However, the more I learned about differentiation, my confidence waned and my understanding descended into a sea of questions and uncertainty. But I came to realize that when my goals/objectives are solidly determined and lessons are continuously updated using observations of students' work and class responses, the focus on what is important and unnecessary becomes obvious and measurable; and other segways and choices become far more manageable.

To set goals and ensure skill transfer, I ask class teachers what will be covered over the next month (i.e. plant cycle and letter writing). Usually these topics interconnect with our ESOL curriculum (i.e. plant vocabulary and

capitalization/punctuation). Once I have an idea of my goal/objective, I ask myself:

Think future/Big picture - "Will this help students in their lives? Is this important for future learning? How can it crossover to other learning/content areas?"

In contemplating this, goals solidify, objectives flesh out and lessons start to dictate themselves. Thus the myriad of choices become more manageable.

Even for teachers who have a prescribed curriculum, one technique which significantly improved my ability to differentiate and in turn improved student learning is taking notes during lessons. It becomes a running record of strategies or scaffolds I used and what students said or did:

"Loic & Max: need proper/common nouns-try card game/sort"

"Ang: self-correct 6/8 times, pronunciation sibserly>sincerely"

"All: assess plant parts"

The last 2-3 minutes of each lesson, I finalize my notes while students finish class work. Those with language ability are involved in my note taking process.

Questions I ask myself when I finalize notes are:

Think immediate- "Do the students know what we are doing and why?"

Think connections- "Did the students have an 'Aha' today?"

Interestingly this straightforward process of briefly noting my observations reduced my planning time. No longer am I sitting at home trying to determine where to go next. My notes supply an immediate direction. In addition, I noticed my pacing has improved. I don't drag units past their 'due date'. If I thought the unit would go six days and it lives its life in four, then that is what I do. I don't worry about ending or starting a concept/topic mid-week. If students need an

extra day to clarify; we do. Consequently, I don't beat a dead horse either. If I employ various strategies and scaffolds and students aren't responding as expected, I move on. Of course, I *make a note* to review again later. 😊 The flexibility and stability this provides, keeps us on track and reinforces that what I do is impacting student learning.

Sometimes it's the simple ideas that eliminate the guesswork when differentiating. Consistently, using observations to adjust instruction as well as modify goals and objectives has made my potentially haphazard situation more manageable and effective.