

1. The challenge

Not many people know Balkesh Kaushal, marathon runner from Great Britain, who competed in the 2010 Berlin Marathon – and came in last. It took him 7 hours, 9 minutes and 24 seconds to cover the approximately 42 kilometres. Quite a while, but at the end of the day he had made it! Many more people, at least within the running community, might know Patrick Makau from Kenya. He ran the same race at an average speed of about 20 km/h and after about two hours he arrived first. What's the lesson for teachers here?

Students, just like runners, do not move at the same pace, each individual has his personal speed. This sounds trivial but if you observe formal language learning in action, you will find that such common knowledge is often ignored. Studies suggest that the task performance of children and teenagers differs at a ratio of 1:4 in terms of time. A fast learner may take 5 minutes to complete a task; his fellow student sitting next to him might need 20 minutes. Adults differ 1 to 9, according to the same studies. Since completing exercises and finishing tasks is crucial for successful language learning, the challenge is obvious: How can teachers cope with such differences if they teach groups of 10, 20 or even 30 students?

Their usual answer is a compromise, i.e. they allow an average amount of time for the whole class, a measure which seems appropriate for the average student - but not for the rest. Slow learners do not get the time they need. They never have the chance to finish tasks set by the teacher, thus lacking practice and progress. The result is often poor classroom performance and a gradual decline in self-esteem and motivation. "Why bother, I won't get it done anyway." Fast ones, on the other hand, feel bored due to waiting periods and lack of challenge. They deserve to be attended to and cared for as well. Students differ not only in speed but also in cognitive skills, prior knowledge, learning styles, modes of perception and motivation. The "one-size-fits-all" idea, which makes all students learn the same things, with the same objectives, in the same way and within the same time slot is bound to fail. That way, individual learning progress is hampered for many and the bottom line is that both teachers and students feel frustrated.

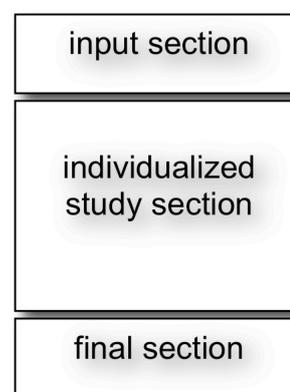
2. The sandwich principle

Fortunately, there are alternative approaches to meeting the challenges described above, theoretically elaborated and successfully put into practice. Among them there are "best solutions", which need both time and large scale collaboration to develop but also simpler remedies that can be put into effect tomorrow. One of these small steps will be presented in

this article: let's call it the 'sandwich principle'. According to this principle, lessons are sequenced in three steps, just like a sandwich that is made up of three layers. At the start there is a teacher-directed instructional period, a sort of lead-in for the whole class. It is followed by a differentiated study section, the main part of the sandwich. The lesson finishes off with a short plenary sequence, directed again by the teacher. Time shares should be roughly two thirds for the central sequence and one third for the top and bottom of the sandwich together. Let's take a closer look at each section now.

Lead-in

Holding the reins here, the teacher can engage in various activities to get the lesson going: introducing the topic, raising the students' motivation, providing a thematic overview, creating a wider context, relating to the students' previous knowledge, conducting a first practice cycle, etc. The lead-in is basically a teacher-directed input section aiming at an effective preparation of the subsequent study section.



Study section

This part of the lesson allocates ample time for actual learning activities. It is characterized by various measures of differentiation to make it most effective. Providing a complete set of several tasks at one point in time instead of single ones piece by piece is a comparatively simple but very effective strategy. Thus, different learning speeds among students are accounted for. Remember - slow learners need four times as long to complete a task as fast students.

Providing a complete set of tasks at the beginning of the study section enables each student to take "his/her time". Slow learners get the chance to complete at least the first, basic task of the task set, an experience they rarely make in traditional, step-by-step class design, although necessary to develop skills, motivation and self-esteem.

Fast students, on the other hand, are not hampered by a teacher-driven average speed but can – and should – achieve more. On the whole, the study section aims at allowing asynchronous learning processes for the benefit of all.

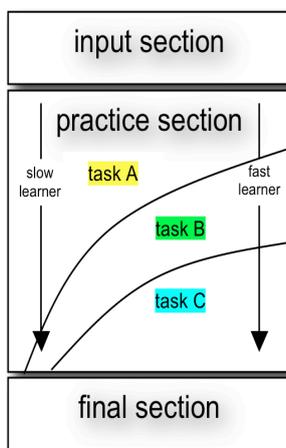
More strategies of individualized learning can be embedded in this phase: Most important, tasks can be set at different levels leading to different

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skills. In such an arrangement, however, basic skills have to be trained by all learners through one or more obligatory basic tasks. Slow learners complete fewer tasks but do so more thoroughly for they get sufficient time.

Task sets can have a systematic structure, in which task B is based on task A, task C on B and so on. A different arrangement would start out with a basic task (task E) but then offer a choice of 3 or 4 parallel tasks (F, G and H), which have the same content and objective but vary in terms of social interaction (individual, pair or group work), style of activity (receptive vs productive) or mode of perception (visual, auditive, written).

Students who are more experienced with differentiated learning might even work on different sub-topics, according to their personal interest and motivation, as long as there is a common topical frame. What if students finish their tasks at different times in a lesson? How can correction of mistakes and feedback be organized? At this point, key sheets

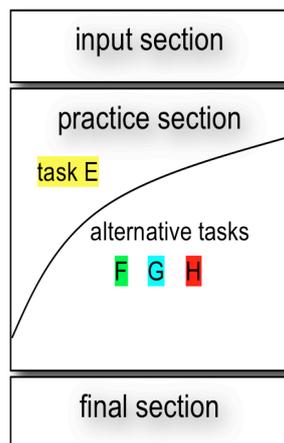


come into effect, a helpful tool for closed tasks and semi-closed (or semi-open) tasks. After completing a task a student picks up an answer key placed on the teacher's desk and checks his answers.

Again teachers should grant sufficient time so that this crucial step is carried out with utmost care. Adopting answer keys and individual checks is a point in itself already if you compare it to the usual centralized, hasty and oral checking practice in a synchronized classroom. The latter

is especially questionable, for it comes too early for the slow ones who have not finished the corresponding task. What is more, classroom noise and bad acoustics often impair clear understanding. Finally, spelling errors are not revealed in oral checking routines.

Giving feedback on semi-open tasks is more difficult since more than one solution is possible. The answer key could list all possible answers but peer-correction can also be effective here, a method also apt for closed tasks.



Feedback on open tasks can be done in pairs as well but the complexity of such tasks and their solutions demand the teacher's expertise. He/she could give feedback during the study section itself or do the reading and evaluation of texts at home.

Another way of evaluating written or oral products, e.g. a letter, a little story or a dialogue, is presenting them in the third section of the sandwiched lesson to the whole class. Here feedback can be given by teacher and students alike. As a side effect, slower students get a helpful impression of how others have tackled the task. This experience might enhance their grasp of the task, whether they strive to copy the model or alter it.

Final section

The bottom slice of the sandwich, part 3 of the lesson, is guided by the teacher again, like the first section. Here students may present all kinds of results produced during the study section. Even unfinished work could be evaluated to give it a boost. The teacher might want to focus on the essentials of the lesson or look ahead at follow-up questions, issues or topics.

The final section can also be a time to reflect on the teaching and learning process, on the tasks, materials and organizational setting of the study section just completed. Last but not least, the teacher can provide his students with necessary information and useful tips.

3. Variations

It is extremely useful to have a flexible understanding of the sandwich principle so that it can easily be adapted to larger time units such as 60- or 90-minute lessons. In this case a second plenary phase could take place at some point during the study section, where the teacher might provide more input or students might want to present provisional results.

In upper grades the sandwich can grow even more, in thickness and richness. Teaching units may stretch over several days and weeks comprising 10 to 20 lessons. With time periods growing it makes sense to extend the lead-in substantially. In addition, the long study section in the middle can be interrupted by shorter teacher input periods whenever necessary, thus adding more layers to the sandwich.

4. Example

(A regular 45 minute lesson on "Food & Drink")
Lead-in:

Teacher leads into new topic, introduces new lexical and grammatical items, directs one or two short oral practice cycles with all students, announces following task set, hands out task sheets, gives hints regarding support, study time, solution sheets, etc.

Study section:

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Students start with task A (e.g. a vocabulary matching exercise), come to the front, pick up an answer key and check; continue with task B (e.g. a gap fill exercise), correct using the answer key, etc. Fast students then have time to do task C (e.g. an oral dialogue about “planning a party”)

Final section:

Teacher conducts quick survey on status of task completion, asks slower students to read out task A or B, faster students function as monitors, then teacher offers stage for dialogue presentations, then gives feedback to individual students and class as a whole, finally announces homework

5. Questions & answers

Are students able to deal with open classroom arrangements? Don't they just put in minimum effort and waste time?

Many learners have experienced open classroom settings in primary school. Avoiding demands and idling may occur but are less likely if there is a choice of challenging tasks or materials.

What if fast learners slow down deliberately so as to avoid additional work?

Experience shows that this rarely happens. Moreover, the teacher could counsel bright students to make them aim at high level objectives.

Don't fast learners consider it unfair if they are expected to do more than their fellow students?

It is necessary to lead students to a deeper understanding of fairness, differentiated learning and responsibility. Most children and teenagers want to learn – if it makes sense to them.

Where can material for task design be obtained from?

Publishers of modern course books offer a great variety of additional material suitable for differentiated learning. Moreover, teacher cooperation can decrease time for lesson preparation substantially.

Don't students simply copy solution sheets instead of struggling with tasks and exercises?

Things like that do happen but not very often. Teachers should try to convince cheaters that mere copying has little effect on learning outcomes. As a last resort answer keys can be handed out upon delivery of the completed task.

What about the noise level during the open study section?

Since self-organized study involves more activity

on the part of the learners, the classroom can become noisier now and then. However, as a productive kind of noise it is more acceptable than disruptive interference. Of course, students can be trained to whisper or speak in a low voice. Oral tasks can also be carried out outside the classroom.

Can self-correction with answer keys be relied upon? Don't students need a centralized, teacher-directed feedback on their tasks to correct wrong entries in exercise-books and on worksheets?

In comparison, traditional feedback routines (students reading out their answers one by one) are extremely unreliable. (see ‘Study section’ above)

How can I know what exactly each student is working on? How can I keep an overview?

Students should fill in record sheets for extended study periods. During those periods teachers have additional time to observe and record students and their activities.

Isn't it tiring for students to do worksheet after worksheet?

Definitely! Which is why task sets should include reading, listening and speaking exercises, which can be carried out individually or in pairs or even groups.

What can I do if students choose inappropriate tasks?

Usually self-direction works out fine. If mismatching persists, the teacher can provide support in terms of counselling.

If bright learners do demanding high-level tasks, doesn't this widen the gap and increase heterogeneity in the classroom?

Withholding fast learners from their potential is not the way to go. Homogenous classes are a myth and cannot be created by stopping the fast ones. Differences between students are not the problem, dealing with them is.

6. Summary

Students learn a foreign language, just like any other skill, at their own pace. Equal time allowances and equal tasks for all demand too much from some and too little from others. Classes structured in sandwich-style can alleviate the situation. Balkesh Kaushal was only able to finish his run because he had been given enough time.

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