

## Strategies for differentiation

Chose engaging and challenging text that makes ‘the road bumpy’ and requires pupils to read slowly and with thought. Give pupils regular exposure to challenging texts. Remember that a text can be challenging for a number of different reasons, such as : unfamiliar context and topic, unfamiliar words, vocabulary, difficult concepts, style of writing, challenging ideas, the nuances and subtleties of the text.

Try not to ‘front load’. Front loading is where the teacher takes away some of the challenge before the pupils even begin to read. E.g. the teacher tells the pupils the main points, provides a lot of key word definitions or uses extensive ‘question and answer’ session to cover the essential elements before pupils read independently. Instead of ‘front loading’ support, consider ‘backend differentiation’.

Methods of differentiation:

- Provide some pupils with the whole text, whilst others are provided with **key paragraphs**, giving them more time to process the information. *Doing more with less.*
- **Consider reading the text aloud once, fluently and without stopping**– just a straight read through with pupils following along. This helps pupils to consider the whole piece and then gives them time to work individually at the meaning of each section.
- Consider photocopying the text and ensuring there is a large amount of white space around the text for annotation, e.g. notes, questions, key vocab.
- Encourage pupils to **preview the text** before they start reading. What is the text about? What can we learn from subheadings, images and diagrams, who the text is written by, date of publication? Pupils find they can make more sense of the text if they have a very clear purpose for reading. What are they looking for in the text? What will they do when they have read the text?
- Encourage pupils to **read the text more than once**. First just focusing on understanding the main ideas and gist, and a second time for close, deliberate and more careful reading.
- Encourage pupils to focus on what **they do know and understand** in a text, rather than what they don’t. Pupils should underline key points, circle any unfamiliar words and try to work out from the clues the **general gist** of the piece. No matter how small, there will always be something they understand within the text. This gives them something to share in small group discussions.
- Consider **chunking the text**, e.g. draw lines between paragraphs and number each paragraph. Ask pupils to focus on just one element at a time, e.g. it may be to simply think about the gist, it may be to think about what surprises them, it may be make a list of unknown words, or list their questions. This helps them to refer to parts of the text when discussing it or when asking questions of the teacher.
- Ensure the **criteria for reading** is very clear, e.g. I can determine the main idea of the text by reading closely, I can list some key details that support the main idea, I can discuss how the main message is supported by the key details, I can find three reasons why...
- Provide **sentence starters** to prompt thinking and **discussion**, particularly around tricky parts of the text. When the author says...I think he means... In the diagram you can see...so I think...
- Provide reminder prompts as to the strategies good readers use, particularly the ‘road block’ strategies. E.g. when stuck readers often read the text again.
- **Vocabulary** – students may need word meanings, but do this sparingly. Too many new words will overload pupil’s working memory. Help pupils to use clues in the text, clues from the context, and their own thinking to first work out the meaning of difficult vocabulary – and then provide any clarification if needed.
- Listen in to discussions so that you can intervene with any misconceptions. Help pupils to **focus in on particularly tricky phrases or paragraphs**.
- Ask pupils to **work in pairs** to grapple with the text together. This usually has more impact when pupils read through the information on their own before starting a paired activity.
- Build up to reading more complex pieces. Provide pupils with simple texts to help build their background knowledge and understanding of a topic and as this grows you can introduce more challenging texts, this provides a ‘**staircase to complexity**’ within a topic.
- **Issues different texts to different pupils on the same topic**, so that when discussions begin everyone has something to contribute but from a text that is at the right level of challenge for them.
- **Model the strategies** you use when you read that help you to make sense of the text.
- Ask pupils to **generate questions** about the text. Ask pupils to answer questions that other pupils have written. Asking and answering questions will help pupils to engage pupils more deeply in the text.

- **Pre-highlight text** for some learners, enabling them to focus on understanding the essential information.
- Provide **hint cards** to help pupils if get stuck.
- Provide **tools** such as sticky notes, highlighter pens, graphic organisers, codes for annotation, etc. to help them engage with the text.
- Place pupils in mixed ability groups of 4 (high ability, high middle ability, low middle ability, low ability) to discuss the text and answer text dependent questions. Collaboration helps them to achieve more than they could individually.
- Give **time and support** for pupils to **evaluate their reading skills and set future goals**.

## a lesson example

Pupils have practiced close reading techniques for a number of months and are now much more comfortable with the process of close reading. “Kayla, why do we read over and over?” the teacher asks. Without missing a beat, Kayla responds, “So we won’t forget the details inside the text.” As she begins the lesson, the teacher asks the pupils to remind her, and each other, of the things close readers do. She begins by reminding them that the first read of a text should be for enjoyment and ‘flow’. Then the teacher invites pupils to add their ideas. Fred offers, “To keep on going and reading through the text to find the answers.” The teacher pushes Fred for further clarification. Fred was thinking of vocabulary that he doesn’t know and with the teacher’s help he describes a strategy to read past unfamiliar words because the rest of the paragraph or page may give them a clue as to its meaning. Other pupils add “You can circle, underline and highlight text and then look at these sections to help you get the gist”.

Today pupils are working on the first chunk of text – two pages from *The Bullfrog at Magnolia Circle* by Deborah Dennard. This literacy nonfiction book is full of descriptive language and important information about how a bullfrog survives. The teacher knows that this text will entrance her class but also prove very challenging to read.

The teacher reads it aloud and asks pupils to follow along, to look at the words she is reading, and just listen for the flow of the story. The teacher asks them to listen for things they hear that are interesting.

After hearing several pupils share their interesting points with each other, the teacher reveals the learning targets for their close reading:

- I can determine the main idea of an excerpt from the book by reading the text closely.
- I can list key details in the text that support the main idea.
- I can describe what the main character wanted and what he did.
- I can discuss how the main message is conveyed through key details.

Pupils turn and talk to their partners about vocabulary words that appear in the learning targets.

In order to engage them actively in the reading, the teacher has photocopied the two pages and given each pupil a copy. They are now ready to circle unfamiliar words, underline key details and identify the gist.

In order to check understanding, the teacher than pairs pupils up for a ‘back-to-back, face-to-face’ protocol. Standing back-to-back with their partner, the teacher tells pupils that when they turn to face each other they will explain some of the key details they chose to underline in the text.

The pupils swap partners. This time when they turn face-to-face they have to discuss the unfamiliar vocabulary they chose to circle.

Pupils swap partners again and in the last round they focus on the main idea of the text.

The teacher circulates during this activity, listening to responses and adapting the lesson as necessary.

On a graphic organiser, pupils write what they think the main idea of the text is. After sharing ideas at their tables, they go back to the graphic organiser to write down key details they found in the text that support the main idea.

At the end, the teacher encourages reflection on how they have engaged with the text and the skills they have used.

*Edited and adapted extract from : Transformational Literacy, Berger and Woodfin 2014, p179/178.*