

# 15 Differentiation at the lower secondary level in Austrian schools

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## Key words

Concepts of differentiation

Differentiated instruction in lower secondary

Forms of differentiation

Instructional strategies

## In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

How was and is differentiation represented in Austrian schools at the lower secondary level?

What types of differentiation are there?

What is differentiated instruction?

What practical strategies and forms of organising differentiation in the EFL classroom exist?

## Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

Since the mid-19th century, learners' age and achievement have been the main criteria used to organize schools into grades or classes in many Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Faubert, 2012). This also applies to Austria with the exception of single *Mehrstuufenklassen* in rural areas and school pilot projects, in which learners of different ages are intentionally grouped.

In Austria, learners can choose between attending schools that are *allgemein bildende Schulen*, which focus on general education, or *berufsbildende Schulen*, which have an emphasis on vocational training. At the lower secondary level, two types of *allgemein bildende Schulen* can be selected. One of the schools is a four-year comprehensive school called the *Mittelschule (MS)*, formally known as the *Neue Mittelschule (NMS)*. The other choice is to attend the lower secondary level of an *allgemein bildende höhere Schule (AHS)*, also called *Gymnasium*, which is an academic secondary school.

Despite promising research results in favour of a comprehensive school (see e.g., Schmid, 2014), segregation at the lower secondary level has been maintained in Austria and is the subject of ongoing political controversy. Among the OECD coun-

tries, Austria is one of the few European countries that still refrains from implementing a comprehensive schooling approach for lower and upper secondary schooling, which means that learners' educational careers are decided at a very early age.

Concerning differentiation, there have been various attempts to achieve it in lower secondary schools. For example, the predecessor of the *NMS*, namely the *Hauptschule*, consisted of ascending grades and was usually divided into two *Klassenzüge*, in which learners were streamed according to their abilities. This was expanded in 1985, when a system based on *Leistungsgruppen* was introduced (Seebauer, 2004a). In this new system, ability grouping/tracking was implemented, which included three ability levels for German, maths and foreign languages, respectively.

In 2012, the *Hauptschule* was replaced by the *NMS*. In contrast to its predecessor, the *NMS* introduced a concept of internal differentiation, i.e., the adaptation of contents, processes, products and environment according to learners' readiness, interests and learning preferences (Tomlinson, 2014). A co-teaching system was also established in German, maths and foreign languages for the majority of these lessons. In these subjects, lessons were taught in *vertiefte* and *grundlegende Bildung*. In other words, emphasis was placed on in-depth and fundamental knowledge, respectively.

At the moment of this publication, changes to the comprehensive middle school (*MS*) are taking place again, and this time they rely on a type of external differentiation based on learners' achievements. In this two-tiered school system, learners are assigned to Standard and *AHS* Standard groups for German, English and maths (RIS, 2020a). The *AHS* Standard mark reflects college preparatory schoolwork; anything below that is considered a standard grade. Based on this two-tiered system, a learner can be taught at a Standard level in maths but at an *AHS* Standard level in English, for example. The assignment to groups is flexible.

### **Differentiation and school types – terminology and concepts**

In general, definitions of the term 'differentiation' either relate to external categorisation by achievement (i.e., *MS* or *AHS*; or labels such as *Klassenzüge*, *Leistungsgruppen* or *Standards*), or internal differentiation within the single classroom (i.e., choices concerning task difficulty, amount of support for managing the assignments, basic and enriched content made available to learners). Regarding internal differentiation, it may be based on ability (see Harmer, 2015) or learners' readiness (see Tomlinson, 2014). Internal differentiation by ability usually "refers to a wide

variety of teaching techniques and lesson adaptations that educators use to instruct a diverse group of students, with diverse learning needs” (Differentiation, 2013).

Internal differentiation is an essential requirement in the curricula of both *MS* (RIS, 2020a) and the lower level of *AHS* (RIS, 2020b). Attending the lower level of *AHS* entails proving a certain entry level of grades. If learners are not admitted to *AHS* based on their grades, they must attend an *MS*. As a result, the heterogeneity in *MS* classrooms is considerably higher. However, each class, regardless of the type of school, is heterogeneous. Therefore, teachers should acknowledge and cater to their individual learners’ different interests, needs and abilities if they want them to thrive.

In contrast to internal differentiation, differentiated instruction is based on readiness and considers the individual learner’s access point in relation to specific knowledge or skills. Tomlinson (2014) emphatically states that “[r]eadiness is *not* a synonym for ability” (p. 18, emphasis in original). In other words, from Tomlinson’s point of view, readiness is not static as every learner will face challenges or make quick progress at some point. In practice, this can be achieved by offering students choice on their assignments. These tasks can vary regarding, e.g., the topic and the level of difficulty including specific criteria such as complexity.

### **Differentiated instruction at lower secondary schools in Austria**

Internal differentiation in lower secondary schools strongly relies on Tomlinson’s concept of responding proactively to learners’ needs and providing differentiated instruction. Thus, the teacher’s task is to modify content, process and product in line with learners’ readiness, interests and learning profile (Tomlinson, 2014).

In differentiated classrooms, teachers are attentive to learner differences and they must be flexible when it comes to adapting to the situation at hand. For learners to work effectively, it is essential that the content to be taught is organised in a way that sustains learning, which means that a learner-centred approach should be taken. In addition, ongoing formative as well as summative assessment and differentiated instruction are inextricably intertwined to evaluate learners’ progress (see chapter 8 in this volume). There are countless ways to judge learners’ readiness in order to plan and conduct informed, learner-centred teaching. Some of these are: discussions with learners, portfolio work, orientation exercises, learning logs, competence checklists, surveys ascertaining interests or opinions, skills records, homework and observation.

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiation in the classroom can be achieved in these different areas:

- content
- process
- product
- environment

The term ‘content’ refers to the topics that are set in the curriculum and the educational standards. In practice, this means that overall goals are set for each lesson. In the following, we will look at how the topic of shopping, and more specifically taking part in a shopping conversation, can be differentiated in the classroom. In this case the learning goals may include widening the range of topic-related vocabulary, implementing specific grammar structures and improving communication skills (e.g., asking and responding to questions or using singular and plural forms).

‘Process’ is another area in which classroom instruction can be differentiated. It relates to tasks that are designed to support learners in understanding concepts, transferring information and applying knowledge. When preparing a lesson on taking part in a shopping dialogue, teachers need to consider the various levels of learners in their classroom. Teachers can differentiate a shopping dialogue by creating prompt cards with sentence starters or gapped texts to guide the lower-attaining learners. Those learners who do not need the prompt cards could adapt the dialogue individually by coming up with their own ideas.

Another way that the classroom can be differentiated is by having learners create ‘products’. By creating products, learners exhibit what they have learned and elaborate on it. With reference to the shopping example given above, the product could be a dialogue learners practise and act out.

‘Environment’ refers to the working conditions including the organisation and arrangement of the classroom and the learning atmosphere. Thus, the classroom could be turned into a shop or a market for the activity described above.

### **Forms of differentiation: learning styles, preferences and task complexity**

As has already been stated, differentiated instruction takes learners’ readiness, but also their interests and learning profiles into account. The term learning profiles comprises individual learners’ approaches to studying (e.g., analytical, creative), strategies and preferences appropriate for single subjects or topics (Tomlinson, 2014).

There are numerous theories on learning styles and preferences (see Oxford, 1989; Purpura, 2014), some of which will be briefly referenced below. Based on our experience in EFL classes, teachers should consider these concepts when designing tasks because this enriches perspectives and ensures that different levels of complexity are included. These theories contribute to designing a variety of tasks as teachers strive to provide manifold ways of challenging and fostering learners.

Typically, learning styles describe a person's individual combination of strategies and perceptual preferences. These include:

- sensory input (e.g., visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory)
- personality (e.g., introverted, extroverted)
- differences in processing information (e.g., inductive or deductive among others)
- the possession of different types of intelligences (e.g., musical-rhythmical, logical-mathematical or naturalistic)

These variables are distinctively different in each person and should be taken into account when designing tasks to cater to diverse learners' needs. (For a more detailed overview, see Harmer, 2015, pp. 86-89.)

Another way to differentiate tasks is to consider the complexity of tasks. In 1956, Bloom published his taxonomy of complexity levels of thinking. In 2001, it was revised by a group of researchers taking a more dynamic approach that resulted in a change of order of the two highest levels (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). This new taxonomy consists of the following levels: remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate and create. At each level, different thinking processes take place. The model can be used to add complexity to tasks and to challenge learners in terms of critical thinking. Thus, differentiation is achieved. We recommend using a tool such as the Bloom's Taxonomy Teacher Planning Kit when differentiating the complexity of a task (see suggestions for further reading at the end of this chapter). It is not only helpful for designing challenging tasks but can also be used as a checklist for lesson plans to avoid imbalance of complexity in task development.

## **The many faces of differentiation: Instructional strategies in practice**

There is a broad range of strategies and organisational forms teachers can implement in their classes in order to differentiate tasks. Strategies comprise providing visualizations and graphic organisers, scaffolding in skills work (e.g., differentiated listening or writing tasks that are broken down into manageable, progressing

stages), tiered (slightly adjusted) assignments (e.g., in terms of complexity, material or pace), learning contracts with checklists and small-group instruction (see Cowley, 2018; Dodge, 2005; Dudley & Osváth, 2015 for countless practical ideas). Below we will address some of the more often used ways to differentiate classroom learning.

Contrary to popular belief, differentiation does not require special materials. There are numerous strategies for breaking typical coursebook exercises into doable chunks or stages (see chapter 6 in this volume). For example, reading and listening exercises in coursebooks can be adapted by:

- giving options for re-reading and re-listening
- adding a picture to the gap to be filled
- giving the initial letter in gap-fill exercises
- providing a word box with the words for the gap-fill exercise (adding a few surplus words for more challenge)
- deleting halves of words to be completed

Open formats is another approach that can be utilized to challenge learners. For example, when working on developing learners' language skills, teachers can apply open formats. One way to do this is require learners to finish a sentence according to their preference or expand from skinny (skimming, scanning, content-based) to fat questions (inferencing, predicting, evaluating) (see Dale & Tanner, 2012/2018). In addition, structured guidelines for listening and reading comprehension can be offered. These can include graphic organizers, profiles and structures for filtering the most important information, e.g., reasons for or types / symptoms / appearance of something. For writing and speaking, teachers may opt for word boxes which can be used to differentiate a task. The word boxes can include help cards with adjectives or verbs that enrich the learners' vocabulary; help cards with text structure or a model text; or help cards that provide sentence starters or transition words as well as useful phrases (e.g., for an opinion discussion). See Fields (2017) for more practical ideas including scaffolding techniques for videos.

There are some task formats that lend themselves particularly to differentiation. For example, language learning can be organised utilizing interest or learning centres (also called station or centre work), choice boards, or RAFTs (Role-Audience-Format-Topic). These strategies are introduced below in more detail.

For learning or interest centres, tasks and/or materials are usually provided by the teacher. Often task sheets that function as checklists, project folders or logs are also provided by the teacher to help learners to keep track of their progress. Among various ways of organising these centres, there is grouping of learners with time limits

per station followed by rotation, a combination of compulsory and optional tasks, or task selection that is exclusively subject to learners’ choices. Depending on the given time frame and products to be worked on, learners are encouraged to add to the materials provided and bring books, props, pictures, research results, etc.

Choice boards, also called Think-Tac-Toe, “are menus of learning tasks that provide multiple options for student learning or assessment” (Dodge, 2005, p. 65; see Example 2 in Practical Applications below). These boards can be structured in different fashions. One possibility is to have the learners choose a certain number of tasks from all options given, e.g., five out of nine. Another idea is to design tasks with a certain focus per row and let the learners make one choice per row. For example, the first row may contain three tasks resulting in visualizations (e.g., an ad, a poster, a graphic organizer and a photo journal); the second one in oral products (e.g., an interview, a short radio program and a speech) and the third one in written outcomes (e.g., a short newspaper article, rap lyrics and a poem).

RAFTs are instructions for learners to create a product about a topic by taking on a certain role for a particular audience in a specific format (see Buehl, 2017). As far as working with RAFTs, either the teacher can provide a selection of possibilities for learners to choose from or learners can create their own. With regard to the second option, it is very helpful to give learners some guidance about what to choose for their own RAFTs in the form of a simple table (see figure 1 below).

Role	Audience	Format	Topic
People, objects etc.	People, animals, objects...	Type of text or product	Subject of the piece of work displaying learners’ knowledge of a topic
Scientist, journalist, witness, soldier, inventor, film critic, human heart, statue...	Friend, politician, character from a book, museum; readers of a newspaper, pet...	Radio programme, leaflet, news report, diary entry, blurb, short story, cartoon, vlog, ad, email ...	Any topic



Examples			
Travel blogger/vlogger	Tourists	Blog entry or vlog: Top ten list of sights with short information	Inform tourists about interesting places in a city, country, etc.
From a pet's perspective	The owner	Giving a talk	What I like/do not like about my life

Figure 1: RAFT

## Practical applications

This section provides ideas for differentiating all four skills (see chapter 10 in this volume). These strategies have been tried out in numerous lower secondary level EFL classes. Teachers should choose according to their learners' readiness and interests as well as the teachers' objectives.

### Example 1:

**Goals:** learners will expand their vocabulary; learners will engage with the content of texts

**Activity:** differentiating reading

**Rationale:** to work with texts in a meaningful way

**Pre-knowledge:** depends on the respective content

**Level:** CEFR A1+ and above

### Lead-in and pre-work phase

1. Pictures, single words from the text, the headline, a (jumbled) sentence, a diagram etc. from the text are utilized for either introducing or predicting the topic. Here, learners' readiness, pre-knowledge and interests are taken into consideration to promote critical thinking skills.

2. In groups or pairs, learners are encouraged to play with words, make connections or devise definitions for vocabulary or explanations of concepts. The teacher adds new vocabulary that will be needed for understanding the text in this step or the following one.

3. If applicable, sentences from the text to be read (and additional ones that are not in it) may be employed for a whole-class exercise: Learners are asked if the sentences, which are displayed somewhere in the classroom, are true or false or, alternatively, if they are part of the text or not. Individual opinions may be indicated by thumbs up/down or red and green cards. Learners are asked to give reasons for their decisions.

4. Depending on the complexity of the text, challenging or new vocabulary is introduced by providing pictures, synonyms, or a glossary that are embedded in a matching exercise.

5. Subheadings (added by the teacher) are presented to assist learners in being able to grasp the structure of the text. In pairs, learners are encouraged to write down information they think will be found in the respective paragraphs of the text. These expectations are checked with the original later on.

### **While-reading phase**

6. Teachers may want to consider a tool such as [rewordify.com](http://rewordify.com) with its 'text with vocabulary' option to create a text version with synonyms in the margin.

7. Learners are encouraged to visualize content by completing time- or storylines, family trees, tables, charts, diagrams, adding drawings or mind maps etc. Adaptable online tools such as Holt Interactive Graphic Organizers are useful for such tasks (see suggestions for further reading at the end of this chapter).

8. If texts contain charts or info boxes, these might be converted into fill-in exercises for the learners to complete.

### **Post-reading phase**

9. Alternatively, longer texts can be split into paragraphs. In groups, each learner is assigned a paragraph that is studied individually. Together learners work on determining the correct sequence of the text and give reasons for their choices.

10. Learners can also be asked to contribute to joint problem-solving when a task requires every single person's knowledge of a certain paragraph or when learners are provided with different texts for individual study first. This creates the necessity for learners to co-operate but also to support each other if re-reading of passages is necessary for finding solutions.

**11.** Questions of varying complexity levels, e.g., based on Bloom's Taxonomy Teacher Planning Kit, demand lower and higher order thinking skills. These questions can be deployed in manifold ways: in board games, pair work, quizzes or as a basis for 'expert interviews' on the topic of the text, as a selection to choose a certain number from individually, a whole-class check-up – with the possibility of re-reading the information and thus giving the learners ample opportunity for studying the text several times.

**12.** Learners are provided with sentence starters that challenge them to re-read and make use of the information in the text to be completed individually.

**13.** Learners are encouraged to identify, e.g., five new words in the text, write them on a vocabulary card or chart, deduce the meaning from the context, write down their ideas and finally check with a(n) (online) dictionary or glossary. If applicable, a sketch may support the learners in remembering the new word or concept.

**14.** Several post-reading tasks based on the text can be added to contribute to processing and transferring new language and content. Thus, the latter may be consolidated in another medium such as a comic strip, a leaflet, a newspaper report, rap lyrics, an interview, a roleplay or a radio/news programme. Learners can select from a range of options here. Furthermore, students are encouraged to think outside of the box and broaden their knowledge by doing additional research or devising creative products.

## Example 2

**Goal:** learners will visualise content and work creatively focussing on speaking and writing skills

**Activity:** post-work based on a film (also adaptable for: TV programme, YouTube clip, etc.)

**Rationale:** to understand real-life language use and be able to use it in various contexts

**Pre-knowledge:** having watched the film; knowledge about basic visualization techniques (otherwise examples can be provided); basic structure of a letter/longer email, an oral review (provide samples); vocabulary relevant to the topic

**Level:** CEFR A2 and above

Procedure

1. The first time a teacher introduces the types of tasks in the choice board, the learners need to see actual samples before they can choose the tasks. This means for the following task that sample visualizations (for tasks in row one) and model texts, help cards with useful phrases, etc., for written and oral tasks (rows 2 and 3) must be provided.
2. The teacher provides learners with the choice board, asks learners to select one task per row and gives them instructions when (in class or as homework assignments) and how to hand in their work (e.g., as a portfolio, on a learning platform such as Moodle, in their exercise/homework book).

Draw a cluster including all the characters in the film. Draw them and describe how they are linked.	Make a collage (words and pictures) about the film. It can be a summary or describe the locations, feelings and/or characters.	Draw a story-/timeline with the most important scenes of the film.
Pick a scene you liked/did not like. Write an email to the director telling him/her your opinion about the film. (150-200 words)	Invent a new character for the film. Think of a name. What is the character's role? Describe what he/she/it looks like. Does the story change in any way? (150-200 words)	Imagine you are the director of the film. Which actors, locations and music would you choose? Would you change the story? How would your film end? (150-200 words)
Individual work: You are a film critic. Prepare a review for a radio program. (2 minutes; audio recording)	Group work: In groups of three or four, select a scene from the film, make some changes and act it out. (2 minutes; video recording)	Pair work: A journalist is interviewing someone for a radio or TV programme about the film. (2 minutes; audio/video recording)

## **Activities and questions for reflection**

- 1.** Analyse one of your lesson plans and check in which ways differentiation is included. If you have never written a lesson plan, go online and find examples of lesson plans that are designed to differentiate the classroom.
- 2.** Select a topic based on a coursebook unit. Create a choice board consisting of at least 9 options for learners to choose from. Reflect on the tasks which you devised. Why did you create them in this specific way?
- 3.** Design a lesson plan with options for differentiation in line with the content and objectives of your lesson.
- 4.** Is there any area of language teaching or skill that you find particularly challenging to differentiate? Why? Research sources (e.g. books, articles, links) that provide teaching tips for the respective area and list three to five practical ideas.

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Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The Differentiated Classroom. Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (2nd ed). ASCD.

## Suggestions for further reading

Bartosch, R., & Rohde, A. (2014). *Im Dialog der Disziplinen. Englischdidaktik – Förderpädagogik – Inklusion*. Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.

The articles in this book address challenges of and chances for teaching English as a Foreign Language in inclusive settings from a transdisciplinary perspective. Approaches, concepts and experiences are discussed and shine light on current practices.

Brassell, D. (2011). *Dare to Differentiate. Vocabulary Strategies for All Students* (3rd ed.). Guildford Press.

25 strategies for differentiating vocabulary are introduced and explained in several steps with examples. Worksheet templates as well as word play activities are provided. Text and website resources add to the practical usefulness.

Fields, D. L. (2017). *101 Scaffolding Techniques for Language Teaching and Learning*. Octraedo.

Primarily scaffolding techniques for reading are at the centre of this book. Teachers are guided step-by-step through the single techniques, and sample materials supports readers' understanding of how the ideas can be put into practice.

Haß, F., & Kieweg, W. (2013). *I can make it! Englischunterricht für Schülerinnen und Schüler mit Lernschwierigkeiten*. Klett/Kallmeyer Verlag.

This book provides a wide range of practical teaching ideas and specific examples for teaching in the heterogeneous EFL classroom.

The following websites provide information and useful tools for differentiating your teaching:

Bloom's Taxonomy Teacher Planning Kit: <http://techinfusedlessons.weebly.com/blooms-taxonomy-teacher-planning-kit.html>

Holt Interactive Graphic Organizers:  
<https://my.hrw.com/nsmedia/intgos/html/igo.htm>

Rewordify: <https://rewordify.com/>

The website of Zentrum für lernende Schulen (ZLS), which was launched when the NMS in Austria came into being, provides numerous resources and materials that support schools' development in terms of organisation and in designing learning arrangements that cater for the needs of all learners: <https://www.lernende-schulen.at/>

### **Commentary on reflection questions**

**1. to 4.** Your answers to the reflection questions will depend on your personal teaching experience. The point of these questions is to encourage reflection in the area of differentiation.