Creating Differentiated Content for Mixed-Level Courses
by Sigrun Biesenbach-Lucas and Donette Brantner-Artenie

In an effort to address reduced enrollments, many intensive English programs have had to offer mixed-level classes. We were tasked with designing an effective dual-level curriculum for our program's top two levels (CEFR B2; B2+/C1).

Selecting an Effective Approach

Having regularly used teaching materials that we created ourselves, we found that the tenets of cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988; Sweller et al., 2011) allowed us to design differentiated instruction for combined levels while maintaining elements of our typical teaching approach. We modified our single-level instructional sequences to include differentiated materials and assessment delivered simultaneously *in parallel fashion* to two levels. For both, materials and activities address objectives for reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar— for virtual, face-to-face, or hybrid delivery.

It is more challenging—and more work—to create parallel materials because you are designing two sets of materials. However, you'll find it easier to teach two groups of students if they are engaged in thematically related parallel activities; in contrast, you might find it harder to teach the same class with materials covering different themes. Teaching all students during the same class period in the same classroom with unrelated content is not effective for achieving learning outcomes.

The challenge in creating different, but parallel, materials is that you are not just preparing separate materials for two different courses independent of each other; you need to design tasks so that they can be completed by students *in the same timeframe*, and students at both levels can progress through the course *at the same pace*. Despite variations in tasks, your selection of themes and materials and the joint progression through the dual-level courses enables students to feel a sense of class community.

Structuring Single-Level Task Sequences

In a single-level course, we used the following task sequences for our Reading/Writing (R/W) course:

Reading Task 1 (text accompanied by pre-/during-/postreading activities)
    Vocabulary quiz
      Reading Task 2
        Vocabulary quiz
          Grammar structure review and practice
            Grammar quiz
              Source documentation discovery and practice
                Discovery of writing genre (e.g., summary, short response, essay)
                  Writing Task Draft 1
                    Writing Task Draft 2

See Appendix A for a typical unit sequence for Listening/Speaking upper level.

Each task sequence within a unit is based on two text sources (in R/W) and two recorded sources (in Listening/Speaking [L/S]) on the same theme. In R/W, each text is accompanied by a detailed reading task. The first text is followed by a vocabulary quiz and another reading task on the same theme. We then review and practice relevant grammar structures, and follow up with a grammar quiz. The next element within each unit addresses source documentation issues and provides practice with in-text citations and end-of-text references. After that, we introduce the specific writing genre of that unit through samples from previous students; learners discover the organization and specific features of that genre, and they produce two drafts.

In L/S, the course is also arranged by units, which typically begin with a group discussion designed to activate students' background knowledge while introducing them to the theme and relevant vocabulary. This discussion is followed by the first of two video talk or lecture viewings with related activities. In each unit, students complete individually recorded independent listening and response tasks and group discussions for formal assessment. Each unit culminates in individual or collaborative presentations on content-related themes.

Planning Parallel Task Sequences

The higher level materials are a good starting point for dual-level courses (for us: CEFR B2+/C1), which you can adapt for the lower level (for us: CEFR B2). You can use the same content topics to minimize intrinsic load for both levels and focus the differentiation on similar core materials after engaging both levels in selected anchor tasks, which are *the same* for both levels. Anchor tasks are followed by different, but parallel, practice tasks; specifically, both levels follow the same activity sequence (see the Table).

Table. Adapted R/W Unit Sequence With Parallel Activities

Anchor task: same reading text/task [B2], Topic 1	
• Lower level vocabulary quiz • Lower level next reading text/task [B2], Topic 1 • Vocabulary quiz [B2]	• Higher level vocabulary quiz • Higher level next reading text/task [B2+/C], Topic 1 • Vocabulary quiz [B2+/C]
Anchor task: grammar review	
• Lower level grammar practice	• Higher level grammar practice
Anchor task: in-text citations	
• Lower level citation practice • Guided discovery of writing genre • Writing task with fewer/less complex requirements (2 drafts)	• Higher level citation practice • Discovery of writing genre • Writing task with more/more complex requirements (2 drafts)
Anchor task: same reading text/task [B2], Topic 2 (new topic cycle begins)	

See Appendix B for an adapted Listening/Speaking unit sequence with parallel activities.

Reading/Writing

Same Task: In an R/W course, begin with an anchor text for the unit theme, which is the same for both levels. You should identify anchor texts at appropriate levels; the complexity of the higher level text is reduced if the text is relatively short or on a familiar topic.

Differentiated Tasks: After the initial same task for both groups, have the students complete separate tasks in parallel fashion.
- Both groups have a vocabulary quiz, but the complexity is reduced for the lower level.
- After that, both groups continue with a new reading task related to the unit theme, but their texts are different and at different proficiency levels. Because your reading tasks should follow the same general sequence and include similar foci (e.g., pre-/during-/postreading and vocabulary), both groups work on reading simultaneously and work side by side on the same tasks, but each group works with different materials.

Same Task: If appropriate, you can add a grammar review or introduction of source documentation principles, which you could present as another anchor task to both groups concurrently.

Differentiated Tasks: Then, add parallel practice tasks geared toward each level. For the unit writing task, you can have students discover the organization and features of the unit's target genre from the same written samples, which you can scaffold differently based on level; likewise, your expectations for writing tasks can be scaled for learners.

See Appendix C for general R/W differentiation principles.

Listening/Speaking

In a dual-level L/S course, you can follow a similar approach. Identify an *anchor video source* for both levels and create accompanying activities to be followed by an additional talk/lecture on the same theme but at the appropriate level for each group. The students complete parallel tasks for vocabulary activation, note-taking, comprehension, and selected grammar- or pronunciation-related points.

Throughout the unit, group students in varying combinations within and between levels to engage in discussions in which they address the same topics, but for which they are required to employ differing conversation strategies and vocabulary use requirements. For example:

- You may require the higher level students to employ a wider range and more frequent use of functions such as agreeing, disagreeing, and clarifying.
- You can ask students to complete independent listening and speaking tasks to reflect on a source that they have selected.
- You might offer the advanced group little or no guidance in source selection and required reflection points but give the lower group choices of sources and topics to guide their reflection.

Finally, the class gives pair, group, or individual presentations on the same theme but with differing requirements. See Appendix D for general L/S differentiation principles.

Evaluation

You can design different evaluation rubrics for some task criteria by attending specifically to minimizing intrinsic load (topic complexity) for both learner groups and reducing extraneous load (task complexity) for the lower level. In general, require the higher level students to perform tasks of greater complexity with more difficult source materials and less instructor guidance; conversely, expect the lower level students to complete slightly simplified tasks with less difficult source materials and more instructor guidance. For example:

- *Prompt for higher level students*: Write a five-paragraph essay with three well-developed body paragraphs. Each body paragraph should have three support points; the support points should be based on information from sources, which you need to cite appropriately.
- *Prompt for lower level students*: Write a four-paragraph essay with two body paragraphs. Each body paragraph should have two support points; the support points can come from our reading texts or be based on your own examples. Use basic citation (author + year) for information from texts.

In contrast, your rubric for completing reading tasks could remain the same for both levels because both groups complete the same types of subtasks, even when the texts are not the same.

Similarly, your oral presentation rubrics can reflect the differences in requirements for timing, content and complexity, and source attribution. For example:

- ➢ *Task for higher level students*: Deliver a presentation of approximately 15 minutes. Include explanations of at least two graphs with two or more variables; employ explicit signals and paraphrasing to credit sources in presentation.
- ➢ *Task for lower level students*: Deliver a presentation of approximately 10 minutes. Include explanation of one simple graph and credit sources of information in presentation slides.

When explanation of data is required, have the advanced group include at least two graphs with two or more variables, while the lower group can use one simple graph. When referencing sources, expect the advanced group to include explicit signals and paraphrasing to credit sources, whereas you might ask the lower group to include source information only in their presentation slides.

Conclusion

Interestingly, despite all the work we put into our dual-level course planning, we did not actually teach our newly created courses; the same forces that required us to create them subsided and enabled us to teach single-level courses. We did use the materials that fall, but only those that we had created for the more advanced students. However, other global conditions may impact programs like ours in the future. We have become more confident about dealing with the processes necessary for responding innovatively to new curricular needs.

References

Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science, 12*, 257–285. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1202_4

Sweller, J., Ayres, P., & Kalyuga, S. (2011). Intrinsic and extraneous cognitive load. In *Cognitive load theory* (pp. 57–69). Springer.

Sigrun Biesenbach-Lucas received her MAT and PhD degrees in applied linguistics from Georgetown University. She has taught ESL, linguistics, and teacher training courses, and she is currently an associate teaching professor in the Intensive English Program at Georgetown University; she has also served as a site reviewer for CEA. She regularly presents at TESOL conferences; she has published articles on email communication, and she is the coauthor of Next Generation Grammar 4.

Donette Brantner-Artenie has an MA in linguistics from Ohio University and is an associate teaching professor at Georgetown University, where she teaches in the Intensive English Program. She has taught EFL at the high school level in Romania, and she has been an ESL instructor at Ohio University and Ohio State University. She has conducted teacher training workshops in the United States and internationally and is the coauthor of Next Generation Grammar 4.

Appendix A. Typical Unit Sequence for L/S Upper Level

-Reading task 1 (text accompanied by pre-/during-/post-reading activities
 -Vocabulary preview task
  -Note-taking Task 1
    -Comprehension-focused discussion task
     -Listening strategy review and practice
       -Collaborative note-taking Task 2 and/or other application of ideas from source
         -Listening strategy/vocabulary/grammar pronunciation quizzes
           -Individual response speaking task
             -Application and strategy-focused discussion task
               -Presentation (individual/pair/group)

Appendix B. Adapted L/S Unit Sequence with Parallel Activities

Lower Level (CEFR B2)	Higher Level (CEFR B2+/C1)
Anchor task: same listening source/task [B2]	
• Heavily scaffolded note-taking guide • Lower level listening source and task 2 [B2] • Reduced requirements for note-taking	• Less scaffolded note-taking guide • Higher level listening source and task 2 [B2+/C] • Increased requirements for note-taking
Anchor task: interactive speaking task – same conversation strategies	
• Practice task w/reduced requirements • Assessment—mixed level/reduced requirements	• Practice task w/increased requirements • Assessment—mixed level/increased requirements
Anchor task: same presentation topic/slides	
• Reduced time requirement • Reduced number of required talking points • Visual support—graph/other image (less complex)	• Increased time requirement • Increased number of required talking points • Visual support—multiple graphs/other images (and/or more complex)

Appendix C. General Differentiation Principles: Examples for Reading/Writing

This table includes links to selected resources.

	Lower Level (CEFR B2)	Higher Level (CEFR B2+/C1)
Text Selection Topic Time Management & Procrastination CEFR checker sites: • Road to Grammar Text Analysis • Vocab Kitchen Profiler	Anchor text: Coping with Procrastination [CEFR B2]	
	Cause and Effect of Student Procrastination [B2]	Longitudinal Study of Procrastination, Performance, Stress, and Health [C2]
	Note: The source of texts and their length contribute to extraneous load and exploitability; website/magazine articles can reduce extraneous load for lower level students; text formatting and information sequence determine scaffolding applied in creation of reading tasks.	
Writing - Basic Approach	• **Shorter** models • **Less** complexity (**fewer** support points) • **Scaffolded** samples (e.g., color coding, commentary)	• **Longer** models • **More** complexity (**more** support points) • **Discovery** - students add color coding, commentary
Writing - Summaries	• Summary introduction: **short text segments** and **guided questions** • **higher** word limit (250) • *reducing word limit does *not* make tasks easier	• Summary introduction: **original text**, a **summary** of the text, and **discovery** questions • **lower/stricter** word limit (150-200)
Writing - Essays	• **4 paragraphs** • **introduction, 2 body paragraphs, conclusion** • **2** support points per body paragraph • **1-2 instructor provided sources**	• **5 paragraphs** • **introduction, 3 body paragraphs, conclusion** • **3** support points per body paragraph • **2-3 instructor** provided plus **2-3 own** located sources
Writing & Speaking - Graph Descriptions	• **one** type of graph (line, bar, pie) • **simple** graphs	• **three** types of graphs (line, bar, pie) • simple **and** more complex graphs
Source Documentation	• **sources** written by **one or two authors, and three + authors** • focus on **quotes** → require only one source citation • focus on **basic paraphrases** of one source idea • in-text citation review: use source information provided to write citations - **one, two, or more author sources** • **guided** references writing practice	• also: **citations for ideas supported by more than one source, organizations, texts with no author, indirect citations** (APA) • focus on **paraphrasing** • in short [familiar] text, examine each sentence, **decide if writer needs to add citation, and write appropriate citation** – (signal phrase or reporting verb OR parenthetical) • in-text citation review: use source information provided to write citations for **multiple sources and sources with multiple authors** • references writing practice **without scaffold**

Grammar - Sentence Combining and Punctuation	• rewrite sentences in **1 other pattern**
	• discourse level:
	  ○ **select** connector from **2 choices**
	  ○ **combine sentences** logically
		• rewrite sentences in **3 other patterns**
		• discourse level:
		  ○ **add** correct connector (based on **semantic and syntactic clues**)
		  ○ combine sentences logically, **but use each connector type only once**

Vocabulary - Quizzes	• **two** word options • word bank in groups of **3 words for 3 sentences**	• **three** word options • word bank of **10 words for 10 sentences**

Appendix D. General Differentiation Principles: Examples for Listening/Speaking

	Lower Level (CEFR B2)	Higher Level (CEFR B2+/C1)
Video Selection CEFR checker sites (w/transcript): • Road to Grammar Text Analysis • Vocab Kitchen Profiler	Anchor video: Urban: Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator [B2]	
	Peill: Addicted to Distraction [B2]	Crowell: Three Reasons Why You Aren't Doing What You Say You Will Do [B2+]
Listening Comprehension & Note-Taking: Basic Approach	• **Shorter** listening sources (portions of longer talks/lectures) • **Less** complexity (**fewer** main points or **less complex** content) • **Scaffolded** structure, abbreviated language/ symbols • Comprehension	• **Longer** listening sources (full talks/lectures) • **More** complexity (**more** main points or **more complex** content) • **Discovery** - students add most structure, abbreviated language/symbols • Comprehension
Listening Comprehension & Independent Listening	• **Greater** instructor guidance on selection of independent listening sources • **Greater** instructor guidance on response structure	• **Less or no** instructor guidance on selection of independent listening sources
Presentations	• **Requirements:** ~10 mins in length, with content reduced in amount and/or complexity; no style requirement for references in presentation slides	• **Requirements:** ~15 mins in length with content greater in amount and/or complexity; APA style required for references in presentation slides
Interactive Listening & Speaking	• **Reduced range and fewer instances** of functional discussion expressions	• **Wider range and more instances** of functional discussion expressions
Vocabulary - Selection for Study & Review	• **Instructor selection** of relevant vocabulary • **More instructor guidance** on review and study material	• **Student selection** of relevant vocabulary • **Less instructor guidance** on review and study material
Vocabulary - Quizzes	• **Fewer** vocabulary selections on quizzes; use of target vocabulary is less complex	• **Greater** number of vocabulary selections on quizzes: use of target vocabulary is more complex/demanding
Source Documentation	• Students cite sources **only in individual presentation slides** (no oral reference)	• Students **paraphrase** *and* **credit sources** as integral part of presentation (orally and in slides)