

## What is it and why should I care?

The landscape of teaching is ever evolving. At one time, it was good practice to use differentiation in the classroom. This often caused extra work for the teacher as they diligently created different tasks for students working at different levels. It also had the adverse effect of lowering standards for some students. Differentiation has now evolved. Although the term adaptive teaching is not new (it first appeared in the Department for Education's Teaching careers framework in 1986), differentiation is now out and adaptive teaching is in!

Adaptive teaching is exactly what it sounds like. All students complete the same tasks and have the same desired outcomes. However, the teacher uses their skill to assess and adapt in the classroom to support all students to reach the desired outcome in learning. It may include providing worked models; reteaching ideas that have not been fully understood; carefully pairing pupils for support; using classroom assistants effectively as well as a whole host of other strategies. Ultimately, it is knowing the desired outcome for all students, using constant assessment for learning against the desired outcome and adapting your teaching to support all students to meet that desired outcome.

## What does it do for the student?

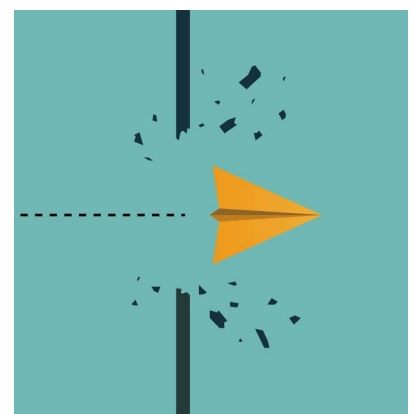
When teachers recognise the need for an adaptation, the students' learning needs are met in the moment. This means that the student is more likely to reach the desired outcome in their learning as the teacher has recognised that, without some adaptation, the student will not reach this goal. A bonus effect of this is that students are more likely to stay engaged in their learning.

Unlike traditional differentiation practice, adaptive teaching expects all students to work towards the same learning goal. No longer are "lower ability" students held back by only completing "easier" work. Instead, the teacher explores what is holding students back from accessing the learning and makes adaptations to help them better learn. This has the effect of raising standards and expectations for students (especially those with SEND needs). An adaptive teacher is an inclusive teacher.

## How do I do this in the classroom?

### Anticipate Barriers - Know your students and prepare for their needs.

If you know your students well, you are more likely to anticipate the learning barriers that they may face. Gather as much information as you can about your students but do not let this information create judgement. For example, you are preparing to teach algebra to a class that contains five students who have English as an additional language. Before you meet these students, this information alone does not tell you about their capabilities. You plan to teach lesson one with a clear outcome for all: "To be able to identify functions in algebra." However, you anticipate that at least five students may have a barrier to reaching this outcome. The barrier may be that they cannot access the learning as they do not understand the language proficiency to understand the lesson. You prepare to adapt your teaching to remove this barrier.



- You plan to assess their language proficiency through targeted questioning right at the start of the lesson. ALL students complete a starter activity that is linked to today's learning. This could be as simple as three questions about prior learning and algebra. As students complete this in silence, you circulate the room with a seating plan in your hand. You plan to review your 5 students' responses but also notice if any other student may need similar adaptations.
- You know which vocabulary is most important to understand the concept and are prepared to teach this vocabulary to a small group, if necessary, as the rest of the class are working on the a task.
- You are prepared to make the learning visual. You can create worked models in the moment if you always have a visualiser on hand in the classroom.
- You have booked a laptop trolley (or other available devices that can access the Internet). If students do not understand the instructions, they can quickly use google translate. You can also use subtitles on your screen as you teach but this only works if all EAL students speak the same language.

Notice how you are preparing to adapt rather than adapting before the lesson begins. The preparations above may not be needed as you find that the students speak the language of your classroom very well. However, all three allow you to adapt in the moment. To be an adaptive teacher, you must plan regular learning checks throughout the lesson. Such as:

- cold calling (asking specific students to answer questions)
- planning checkpoint questions designed to help you know that students have understood your teaching so far
- Circulating the room with a clear understanding of what you need to see students doing to tell you they have understood your teaching...

### Anticipate barriers - Prepare worked models

Your subject knowledge is very important in helping you adapt your teaching. You need to know how the knowledge in your subject is acquired by a novice to teach well. You should also know the common mistakes and misconceptions that students often make. Use this knowledge to prepare worked models. For example, you are teaching eleven year old students how to plan creative writing in English. Even the best writers plan their work. However, most students see planning as pointless. Interestingly, this is even more true for higher achievers than those who struggle with writing. You prepare to adapt your teaching.



- You use well known fairy tales to teach the basics of the story arc. Using what students already know, you free up space in the working memory for learning the concept.
- You read an unplanned story to them (carefully created to have no focus) and ask them to unpick why it does not work.
- You use the visualiser to show them your planning method and how this becomes a story with focus. You allow them space to plan their own stories while circulating the room and looking out for pitfalls (such as lack of detail) to share with the class. You also look out for good examples that are being produced by students so that you are able to reinforce what a good plan looks like without simply referring to your own.
- You use an "I do, we do, you do" approach to teaching and are always prepared to move back to the "I do" section if the concept has not yet been understood.

By planning to teach this common pitfall as part of your curriculum, you are creating worked models that can be used as adaptive teaching for older year groups that should have gained this knowledge by now. You may not need to re-teach how to plan to a whole group of sixteen year olds. However, if you are working on creative writing with a whole group and five of that group are struggling to plan, you can use your common misconception bank of teaching resources as worked examples.

## Anticipate Barriers - Pre reading

Pre-reading can be a powerful intervention for students who have poor prior knowledge. We learn new concepts by searching our long term memories for old knowledge to anchor this new knowledge to. If you have a class of learners with a variety of reading ages, you can anticipate that those with the weakest reading ages will have less prior knowledge and therefore find learning new concepts more difficult. For example, you are teaching History to a group that has a variation in reading ages between 8 and 15. The chronological age of students is eleven. Therefore, some students are reading at least three years below their chronological age. You anticipate they will struggle with longer reading tasks full of new vocabulary.



- Set ALL students vocabulary homework as a pre-reading task. Students learn the words before they are faced with the new idea/ concept or reading. By tasking all students with pre-learning vocabulary, you are not singling out the weaker readers. Vocabulary is useful for everyone but it will be vital for the weaker readers.
- Chunk the information before the new concept is taught. In the term prior to the new knowledge, plan to introduce the main points of the next teaching concept in small chunks. Either as homework or as a moment in the classroom (reflection time/ pre-reading time), introduce smaller ideas such as people or places that you will learn about. Make sure to make an obvious connection with the learning of this term so that students will be able to add it to their knowledge banks. Again, all students will benefit from the pre-teaching moments but, for weaker readers, it is vital.

## What Next?

You probably already recognise many of the strategies that are outlined here as part of your practice. Adaptive teaching is really good teaching that has a clear outcome for all but anticipates the barriers that face some students from getting there.

## As a Teacher

Begin by noting your current adaptive teaching strategies. Explore what you already do and notice what you would like to make better. Choose one strategy to actively improve at a time so that it becomes a learned habit in your teaching that is hard to break.

## As a Department Leader

Include adaptive teaching as an area of focus in your department review. How skilled are your teachers at adapting to the needs of their students in the moment? Following a departmental review, which areas of adaptive teaching, if it got better, would have the biggest impact upon your students? How might you plan a CPD programme that helps them to hone this essential teaching skill?

## As a School Leader

Consider how a whole school approach to adaptive teaching might impact positively upon the outcomes of your learners. Which teachers are the most skilled at adaptive teaching? Which teachers may need coaching to improve? Consider how you might use the strengths of your school to improve the teaching of your whole staff body. Developing a dedicated teaching and learning team in school can support you to investigate and intervene for excellence in teaching.

The illustration I've used on the next page provides helpful insight into how we should approach adaptive teaching. It is taken from Education South West serves as a visual guide for considering strategies to meet diverse student needs effectively.

### Planning and Assessment:

- Define measurable and challenging learning outcomes.
- Use assessment tools (e.g., questioning, tasks, tests) to gather evidence of learning and inform planning.
- Anticipate and address barriers like prior knowledge gaps, vocabulary issues, or SEND needs.

### In-the-Moment Adaptations:

- Adjust difficulty, clarify instructions, or provide scaffolding.
- Use strategies such as peer tutoring, analogies, or step-by-step guidance.
- Highlight essential content or revisit key examples as needed.

### Pre- and During-Teaching Strategies:

- Plan targeted interventions, improve accessibility (e.g., font size, visual aids), and pre-teach necessary skills or concepts.
- Use tools like models or visualizers to support understanding.

# Understanding Adaptive Teaching

The Early Career Framework provides a helpful explanation of why Adaptive Teaching matters:

- Pupils are likely to learn at different rates and to require different levels and types of support from teachers to succeed.
- Seeking to understand pupils' differences, including their different levels of prior knowledge and potential barriers to learning, is an essential part of teaching.
- Adapting teaching in a responsive way, including by providing targeted support to pupils who are struggling, is likely to increase pupil success.

As far as possible, make curriculum do the work of determining learning objectives, assessment methods and likely barriers. A well-planned curriculum will reduce the teacher's need to make in-the-moment adaptations. When additional adaptations are necessary, note that the strategies below are illustrative, not exhaustive, and that adaptations will need considering from a subject-specific point of view.

For an overview of strategies which research evidence suggests can have a positive impact across phases and for all pupil groups, including those with SEND, see the EEF's '5-a-day' approach:

<https://bit.ly/EEF5aday>



Original source The Education Southwest "Understanding Adaptive Teaching" V11

## Considering Each of the above:

Discuss with a colleague how you approach each of these in the subject you teach.

For example:

- What is easier and more difficult to implement?
- Where would you like to develop your knowledge and understanding of adaptive teaching further?

## What Next?

- Are there existing assumptions about differentiation that need addressing?
- Are staff aware of the term 'adaptive teaching'? What do they understand by it? How could you find out?
- If it's relatively new, what would be the rationale for introducing it?
- What will motivate staff to value this approach? What will sustain the momentum and help embed the approach?
- Is there a helpful sequence for building staff knowledge and techniques for effective adaptive teaching?

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