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Forum

Adaptive teaching for GCSE and A level classical literature

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Abstract

The new ITT Common Core Framework (CCF) for teachers expects trainee and early-career teachers to adapt their teaching to support all students in class (Department for Education, 2021). What used to be called 'differentiation' is now referred to as 'adaptive teaching' and full details of what it consists of, as far as the Department for Education in England is concerned, can be found on pages 19–20 of the CCF document. Much of the advice of that document is about supporting students with special educational needs and disabilities, about teachers' need to recognise that different students have different levels of prior attainment and may have barriers to learning, and how different types of student grouping may affect learning in different ways. It dismisses as a 'common misconception' that students have different learning styles and warns against teachers creating 'distinct tasks for different groups of pupils' or 'setting lower expectations for particular pupils'.

Key words: adaptive teaching, differentiation, classical literature, Latin

Background

In response to the CCF and in preparation for teacher training, the University of Cambridge PGCE Classics mentors held a meeting in October 2021 to share classroom practice and experiences with adaptive teaching in classical languages and literature (in the original and in translation) at GCSE and A level (students aged 16–18) and to develop a common understanding. While an outsider might think that all students at that stage in their school careers would be able to access texts in translation at least without difficulty, the evidence pointed heavily against it.

In all the GCSE and A level courses for Classical Civilisation and Ancient History there are huge amounts of translated text for assessment and for wider reading. There was a feeling among the mentors that the new post-2016 examination specifications had increased the amount of material to read – not just the set text material, but also the recommended reading lists. There were lots of things to take into consideration: complex subject-specific and disciplinary terminology, unusual names and numerous people and places (some of whom share the same name). Unravelling them was especially challenging for low prior-attainers and for those new to the subject area. The Covid lockdowns and online learning seemed to have widened the gap in all ages: new Year 7s seem to have missed out on the phonics training they would normally have received, and some sixth formers had achieved high GCSE grades, but were still stumbling over their words. There was a need to enhance students' oracy and literacy skills.

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Ideas

Becky Coe started with some suggestions from her own Classics department in a non-selective girls' comprehensive school for reading and comprehending a lengthy and complex text in translation:

- Reading the text as a whole class, so the teachers can help with pronunciation and comprehension.
- Setting comprehension questions prior to reading so that students can scan ahead and get the gist of the passage.
- Annotating the text by the teacher on the board, either in advance or during the reading.
- Asking students to annotate the text as they comprehend it – thematically, perhaps.

She recommended the *Screencastify* app[1]. The teacher talks through the text and annotates it in front of the students; the app captures the video and audio and records it as it happens for later playback. Students can watch through before the lessons or after. It's good for students who miss something in lessons: they can go back through; or if they are in isolation or otherwise ill. Post-Covid attendance is poor at her school, so students need this. *OBS Studio*[2] also enables screen recording.

Reading chunks of text seems valuable. The teacher records podcasts using *soundtrack.com*. It's a simple way to embed the teacher's voice into a document or slideshow.

Fund a set of 'reader pens' – whilst expensive at £250 each – but possible for some students. These pens read the text out loud (via headphones). They don't obviously help the students comprehend what is being read, but they do seem to help by speeding reading.

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Becky gave a case study of a student who struggled with the Herodotus set text, which is lengthy and contains a challenging narrative thread and confusing names. The teacher rewrote/simplified the stories in bullet points, highlighted the bullet points and placed a reference box and a map to locate the places named in the text. Another student preferred to cartoon-strip the stories. As time went on, and students became more proficient through reading and knowing what to look out for, the teacher could highlight more types of information by using different colours for thematic material, for example. She also gave an example of how this had helped a lower-attaining student who will struggle with a 10-mark question, but she has enough knowledge and will achieve above her target GCSE grade 3, now working at a 5. It is very labour-intensive. The annotated resources are given out as revision studies for all students.

Becky noted: 'One of the challenges in Classics with regards to adaptive teaching is making the text, whether in the original language or in translation, accessible to all our students in all our classes. There is no doubt that this challenge was made even greater by the Covid-19 pandemic and periods of remote teaching and learning. During this time however I was forced to consider adaptive approaches that would continue to make this material accessible even when we were not in the classroom together, where a teacher can pick up more intuitively on any confusion or give immediate and timely support to help students over any hurdles they are facing. The approach I took to this problem was the creation of hyperlinked text, which was not as complicated and arduous as it may sound. If I use GCSE Ancient History as an example; I already had the relevant passages of text for each lesson saved as worksheets and I added to these hyperlinks that took students directly to some wider explanation of a person, place or event, as relevant. These links took the students directly to a range of different resources to give them wider context and support; for example in a passage of Herodotus on the Battle of Marathon, the link took them to a 20-minute documentary on the key events of the battle. Some links took them to a simple video cast of me giving a short explanation of key terms or vital context. A simple hyperlink can take the students to a wide range of places; websites, videos, maps, virtual flythroughs of ancient sites, podcasts or video casts. Once I had developed this for the remote learning environment, it got me thinking. Why not continue to use this as an adaptive approach to teaching text in the Classics classroom? The school I work in, like many others now, has adopted the use of laptops by all students in the classroom, so I can easily share these adaptive resources with the students and they can use the hyperlinks when needed for more explanation and context, plus they will always have them in electronic form to refer back to for homework and revision. I have seen in my own classroom how it can support learners of all levels and enable all students to feel secure enough in their learning and understanding to be able to contribute confidently to whole-class discussions and demonstrate better understanding of the sources in assessments. This approach is not solely limited to literature in translation and we are starting to create hyperlinked Latin text as well. Having originally developed this approach for use with KS4 and 5 during the pandemic, we are now extending it to KS3 as well and seeing the same positive outcomes.'

Feedback from the other mentors included the following suggestions.

Preparation for reading

Preparing in advance – using pictures and art; looking at summaries, video clips, anything before delving into the text.

Introduce the topic or the characters using outreach videos, plenary videos, popular culture – a way in.

Using images to make sure students understand and help recall the passages.

When faced with vast amounts of text, it's a good idea to elicit initial perceptions before going in deep.

Front-loading knowledge – introduce them to the text and the characters that turn up ahead of time; giving them access to the stories before; they have some sense of who the characters are

Before accessing the text, giving out vocabulary derivation sheets, or supporting with unfamiliar vocabulary (more suitable for original literature).

Comprehending the text

Mixing whole class discussion with popcorn reading.

Consider how to get students to empathise with the text.

A personal response for their understanding and recall helps.

Skipping over dull bits, focus on the important content.

The idea that with some parts of the text they just need to know the gist: it is enough that they will remember the smaller bits.

Make it accessible, understandable for everyone – getting the content understood is the first step.

Draw out the meaning of certain more specialist forms (a pyre, a funeral urn etc).

Using student-friendly workbooks.

With Latin literature at GCSE: giving students translations ahead of time, rather than doing work on them in class; they really understand what's going on in the passage, so the lesson is about analysis; all three teachers who have been trying this have seen real benefits: it's too much for their students to get the translation, comprehending what's going on and moving onto the analysis all at the same time (evidence is that for the Year 11s who have just done their mocks their literature paper has been the best for a long time). Provide summaries of the passage as well, especially if it's complex (for example, Tacitus, where it is hard to follow the plot) a summary of the section, for comprehension; provide students with numbering on the Latin to match up the translation; matching Latin to the English.

An example was given of a teacher highlighting each word as she translated each word (on *Screencastify*); students can follow the words listening, and later turn off the sound and follow along without it (with original Latin literature).

Note-taking

Not making assumptions about students' understanding.

Tricky sections – dividing up chunks and getting students to share them in groups, and then together working out the sections before coming back together and unravelling them as a class.

The importance of working together, reading together, analysing together, makes it more accessible for lower prior-attainment students.

Having or making a 'cast list' when studying texts, especially with the *Iliad* – for example, groups of Trojans and groups of Immortals.

How to spell key characters and important characters – reminders.

Trying to isolate key words or phrases for students to focus attention on.

Classical civilisation: a shared note taking on Google docs; different people got different themes to write on and then share; summarise the whole play on paper as a revision for the students; liked the idea of the recording – oracy – talk through answers through 10-markers, maybe with the text displayed; podcasts on questions.

Rewriting the set text from the point of view of different characters.

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Recall

Getting back to basis: repeating things week by week in small chunks, and weekly testing.

Check if they do really understand what's happening.

Use regular retrieval and recapping; a small number of questions at the beginning of the lesson, to encourage them to remember what happened, for picking out characters and incidents important for the lesson.

Comprehension quizzes on *Blooket*[3], especially key terms; reading through passages together and checking comprehension.

Further reading

The CCF has a list of generic readings for research into adaptive teaching practices on pages 41–42 (Department for Education, 2021).

For articles on 'differentiation' in Classics teaching, see Platt (2018), Downes, McDonnell and Hunt (2012), Hunt (2009). Hunt (2016, pp. 58–70) also discusses forms of differentiation.

For examples of ways to engage students in reading and comprehending lengthy texts in translation, see Lucas (2021), George (2020), Rushton (2018), Ford, (2019), Jones (2017; 2016), Bragg (2016), Sanchez (2014) and Cresswell (2012).

For insight into the difficulties low-attaining students face with original text, see Wright (2017); and for ideas for helping them improve, see Hill, Crown and Leach (2016).

For tiered original texts as a form of adaptive teaching for original Latin literature, see Hunt (2022 forthcoming), Gall (2020) and Sears and Ballestrini (2019).

Notes

1 https://www.screencastify.com/
2 https://obsproject.com/
3 https://www.blooket.com/

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