



EBOOK

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO ADAPTIVE TEACHING





Adaptive Teaching is an increasingly popular approach to teaching, focusing on tailoring lessons to the differing strengths, weaknesses and needs of each student. This personalised approach involves adjusting the pace, support and materials you provide, to ensure all students can reach a certain learning goal.

In this guide, discover all about Adaptive Teaching and how you can use it to help improve student outcomes.

Book Adaptive Teaching CPD training

WHAT IS ADAPTIVE TEACHING?

Adaptive Teaching is a student-centred approach to teaching. It is the process of adapting the lesson to different children and their needs. This involves adjusting the pace, support and materials you provide to cater to the individual strengths and weaknesses of every learner. The essence of Adaptive Teaching is how teaching style is personalised in response to the idea that all students have differing abilities.

This teaching strategy is rooted in the understanding that learners are diverse and will all require different support, provided in different ways to help them to complete challenging work. You could think of it this way: we are not trying to get our students to adapt, but to adapt our own practices accordingly to individual learners.

Adaptive Teaching means making sure that all students can reach a certain learning goal, even if it takes different means for each student. In practice, Adaptive Teaching might involve offering an alternative explanation to a student who is struggling to understand a concept. Assessing students and using that data to drive your decisions about how to best support them is crucial in Adaptive Teaching.

In essence, Adaptive Teaching reflects the belief that every student can learn and succeed if they are taught in a way that aligns with and supports their individual needs and abilities.

On Adaptive Teaching, the Early Career Framework states that:

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

WHAT IS ADAPTIVE TEACHING NOT?

Adaptive Teaching is a powerful tool in education, which is when teachers are flexible in their practice to cater for individual needs. But to fully grasp its potential, it is essential to understand what it is not.

Adaptive Teaching is not: A one-size-fits-all approach

Adaptive Teaching does not mean giving the same amount of support to all students. It involves tailoring teaching to each student's unique abilities and needs.

Adaptive Teaching is not: Rigid

Adaptive Teaching is not a rigid or automatic process. It requires flexibility and adaptability. Based on continuous assessment, teachers adjust their strategies to meet changing student needs.

Adaptive Teaching is not: Done in isolation

Successful Adaptive Teaching requires collaboration with other school staff, parents/guardians and the students themselves. Those conversations can help shape more effective adaptive strategies.

For example, if teachers are going to use Scaffolding (more on that later) to support their Adaptive Teaching, it may be helpful to discuss with the subject team what putting heavy, medium or light Scaffolding in place would look like.

Adaptive Teaching is not: Devoid of structure

While Adaptive Teaching requires flexibility, it's not devoid of structure. Clear learning goals, step-by-step instructions and organised lesson plans provide a roadmap which teachers use and can adapt accordingly.

Recommended reading:

- [How can we tailor Cognitive Science strategies for novice learners? A teacher's guide](#)
- [Using Cognitive Science to develop a knowledge-rich curriculum: The biggest challenge](#)
- [How helpful are learning objectives?](#)

IS ADAPTIVE TEACHING THE SAME AS DIFFERENTIATION?

[Adaptive Teaching and Differentiation](#) are both strategies aimed at catering to the range of students' learning needs. However, they are not the same thing.

Differentiation focuses on designing lessons, activities and assessments that suit different levels of learners. This caters for different groups of students learning at different paces. However, the technique of Differentiation requires you to decide, before the lesson starts, which activity a particular group of students will complete. This can place limits on student achievement by streamlining them into a path of a specific learning outcome.

On the other hand, Adaptive Teaching is a more responsive approach that focuses on the class, whilst responding to the needs of individual students. It involves planning prior to the lesson, but also adjusting practice while actively teaching based on each student's progress. This could involve modifying teaching methods, pace or resources as the lesson happens in response to student feedback or performance. In essence, while both Differentiation and Adaptive Teaching aim to cater to individual student needs, they do so in different ways. Differentiation is more about planned variation in teaching, while Adaptive Teaching is about real-time adjustment.

Recommended reading:

- [Which type of worksheet is the best for your lessons?](#)
- [How to use the scarcest resource in education wisely](#)

HOW CAN ADAPTIVE TEACHING HELP STUDENTS OVERCOME BARRIERS TO LEARNING?

Adaptive Teaching is central to the shift towards a more personalised approach to teaching because it recognises and addresses the individual differences among students. But how can Adaptive Teaching help students to overcome barriers to learning?

Prior knowledge: The foundation of learning

Students walk into the classroom with different levels of understanding and background knowledge. While some have a solid foundation, others may have gaps.

This [difference in prior knowledge](#) can significantly impact their learning outcomes. This is where Adaptive Teaching steps in, providing personalised instruction that builds on what the student already knows and fills in any gaps. This strategy ensures that students are neither left behind nor bored with material they already know. It also prevents them from feeling overwhelmed by concepts they are not familiar with.

Limited working memory: Overcoming cognitive overload

Our [working memory](#) is where we hold and manipulate new information in our minds over the short term. Some students may have a smaller working memory capacity, making it more challenging for them to process and retain new information.

Adaptive Teaching provides strategies (such as breaking down complex tasks into smaller steps, offering visual aids or mnemonics, and providing opportunities for repetition and practice) that can [help students manage their working memory effectively](#), helping them to reach their learning goals.

Addressing misconceptions: Correcting erroneous beliefs early

Misconceptions are common among students and can hinder their learning progress. Adaptive Teaching helps identify and address these early on in the process and helps students develop accurate and deeper comprehension. This may involve Explicit Instruction, engaging class discussions, hands-on activities or real-world applications.

Recommended reading:

- [Know more, remember more: How to overcome the key barriers to learning](#)
- [Rosenshine's second Principle of Instruction: Present material in small steps](#)
- [2 things to consider when using Explicit Instruction](#)

WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN ADAPTIVE TEACHING AND SCAFFOLDING?

Adaptive Teaching and Scaffolding are interconnected strategies that work together to enhance student learning.

A key principle of Adaptive Teaching is that teachers hold high expectations for students. Research supports the idea that when we expect more from someone's performance on a task, they tend to do better at it.

This is known as [the Pygmalion Effect](#), a concept that illustrates the power of expectations in influencing performance. When we teach adaptively, we display high expectations for our students and we are willing to put in place all the support they need to get there.

So, how can we provide this support? This is where Scaffolding comes in.

[Scaffolding is the practice](#) of providing temporary, structured support to students as they grapple with new concepts or skills. As their confidence increases, this support is gradually faded away. This helps to encourage independence in students and can be used in Adaptive Teaching.

Teachers can adjust the amount of scaffolding for each student. For example, heavy Scaffolding, where the support remains high, is in contrast with light Scaffolding, when more limited support is in place. Scaffolding is a great way to make Adaptive Teaching successful by helping to support students in a way that allows them to work towards reaching the learning objective.



By integrating Scaffolding techniques within an Adaptive Teaching approach, teachers can ensure that students receive an optimal balance of support and challenge. This combination helps students to reach their potential.

Recommended reading

- [The Expertise Reversal Effect, scaffolding support, and how to do it](#)
- [Rosenshine's eighth Principle of Instruction: Provide scaffolding and support](#)
- [Why do students need Scaffolding?](#)

WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN ADAPTIVE TEACHING AND THINKING & PARTICIPATION RATIOS?

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WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN ADAPTIVE TEACHING AND THINKING & PARTICIPATION RATIOS?

Adaptive Teaching and thinking & participation ratios are interconnected concepts that, together, can significantly enhance learning.

[“Thinking ratio” refers to](#) the balance between the time the teacher spends talking and the time students spend thinking within a lesson. An optimal thinking ratio is one where students spend a significant proportion of the class time actively engaged in thinking, problem-solving and articulating their understanding. Ideally, it is advised to aim for the students to do the greater proportion of the cognitive work.

Adaptive Teaching helps foster an environment which provides enough difficulty for students to be suitably challenged but isn't so tricky that it prevents engagement. As a result of moving at a suitable pace through the content, students can keep up. This means that they can actively cognitively engage. This can lead to deeper understanding, improved retention, and an optimal thinking ratio in the classroom. Both Adaptive Teaching and the thinking ratio are integral components of effectively delivering a lesson where students can be challenged and fully engaged. Teaching adaptively with our classroom's thinking and participation ratios in mind can foster an engaging and inclusive environment.

Recommended reading:

- [Thinking and participation ratios: Maximising cognitive engagement](#)
- [Why longer Wait Times might transform students' learning](#)
- [How to optimise students' cognitive engagement and reduce boredom](#)

PROTECTING STUDENTS, STAFF AND DATA WHEN USING AI

In navigating the landscape of data protection, student and staff safety, and responsible usage of Generative AI, the Department for Education articulates crucial considerations to uphold security. Here are the key points outlined in their policy statement:

Data protection

Understanding the [data privacy implications](#) of utilising Generative AI tools is paramount to ensure compliance with data protection laws and safeguard personal and special category data. Transparency with data subjects, especially students, is essential to inform them about the processing involved with AI tools.

Intellectual property

Schools and colleges must adhere to regulations safeguarding personal data and intellectual property, such as students' work. It's imperative to obtain appropriate consent or copyright exemptions before using such assets to train Generative AI models.

Cyber standards

Reviewing and bolstering cybersecurity measures is crucial to mitigate potential risks posed by Generative AI on cyber threats. Schools and colleges can refer to the cyber standards for guidelines on enhancing security protocols.

Recommended reading:

- [How to write your school's AI policy \(with examples\)](#)
- [Generative AI in education: The government guidance, explained](#)
- [Protecting your school's data in the age of AI](#)

ADAPTIVE TEACHING AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Adaptive Teaching involves tailoring instruction and activities to meet the unique needs of each student, providing them with personalised support and guidance. But how do we identify these individual needs?

Conducting formative assessments during the learning process provides you with real-time feedback on your students' progress. They're ongoing, helping you to [identify knowledge gaps](#) and adjust your teaching strategies accordingly, making them an ideal tool for Adaptive Teaching.

Let's delve into some [effective formative assessment](#) strategies that can benefit your Adaptive Teaching:

- **Hinge questions** – Quick, multiple-choice questions focused on a specific concept.
- **Mini whiteboards** – Low-stakes tools for students to demonstrate their understanding.
- **Questions** – Short quizzes to assess students' grasp on a topic.
- **Generative Learning** – Practical tasks requiring application of knowledge, offering valuable insights into students' understanding.

By using formative assessments to identify how your students are coping with content, you can adapt your teaching to meet individual needs, promoting personalised learning and ensuring every student can succeed.

Recommended reading:

- [Universal practices of effective teaching: Formative assessments, examples and feedback](#)
- [How to assess students: Multiple-choice questions vs essays](#)
- [Teacher assessments: 11 cognitive biases to keep in mind](#)

HOW TO USE EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS IN ADAPTIVE TEACHING

Adaptive Teaching can be greatly enhanced by [using questions effectively](#). This encourages active learning and fosters an environment of curiosity and exploration. Questions are also a powerful indication to the teacher as to how well students are developing their understanding of the topics covered in class, providing them with real-time insights into students' understanding and enabling them to adjust their practice effectively.

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions, which often begin with “What if...?”, “How might...?” or “Why do you think...?”, can stimulate critical thinking and invite a range of perspectives. They can also serve as a gauge for teachers to understand students' prior knowledge and adapt their plans accordingly.

Guiding questions

Guided questions are designed to steer students towards key concepts or insights. They can be particularly useful when introducing new topics or transitioning between different parts of the lesson. Guiding questions can also help teachers assess students' understanding in real time and make the necessary adjustments to their instruction.

Reflective questions

These encourage students to consolidate their learning, reflect on their understanding and apply their knowledge in new contexts. Reflective questions can provide valuable feedback for teachers to adapt future lessons based on students' learning progress.

Recommended reading:

- [Rosenshine's 5 tips for engaging students with questions](#)
- [Asking effective questions to improve feedback in the classroom](#)
- [Rosenshine's third Principle of Instruction: Ask lots of good questions](#)

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF ADAPTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES?

We need to start with a caveat: there is not one exhaustive list which covers every strategy that can be used in Adaptive Teaching. Your expertise and your knowledge of your own students will be your best tool to practically inform how to best apply this technique.

With this in mind, here are some strategies that can help you get started with using Adaptive Teaching in your classroom.

Before the lesson: Plan and prepare for a range of outcomes

Anticipating that students will need to be supported in different ways and receive different levels of Scaffolding, prepare your lesson accordingly. Remember that the goal of Adaptive Teaching is to adjust the support we give our students. Some students might need to see multiple, fully worked through examples before they are able to successfully answer a question. Others may only need prompting with a few key words.

During the lesson: Assess and adapt

During the lesson, the key to being adaptive is to have a good idea of which support each student will need to achieve their goals by regularly checking for understanding. When you have identified that a student needs more Scaffolding to achieve their goal, implement teaching strategies that are responsive to student needs. This could include Scaffolding techniques if needed, such as clarifying the task. If the student still needs support, you could explain the concept in a different way or give additional examples. To break the task down, you could offer students a list of step-by-step instructions to help them to chunk a task into more manageable pieces.

Recommended reading:

- [Rosenshine's fourth Principle of Instruction: Models and examples](#)
- [Cold-Calling vs Think, Pair, Share vs mini whiteboards](#)
- [What is the most important of Rosenshine's Principles?](#)

ENHANCING ADAPTIVE TEACHING WITH THE “I DO, WE DO, YOU DO” MODEL

Adaptive Teaching is all about meeting students where they are in their learning journey. One powerful tool to aid this approach is the “I do, you do, we do” model.

This method encourages a gradual transition of responsibility from teacher to student, promoting active learning and engagement.

Step one: I do

The process starts by [demonstrating the new skill that you are teaching](#). This stage is all about clear instruction and thorough explanation. It's about making sure your students understand every step.

For students who need more Scaffolding, you might need to repeat your demonstration a few times to ensure that they can grasp the concept. Additionally, some students might need the concept explained in a different way to develop a full understanding.

Step two: We do

Next, it's time for some student participation. You and your students work together to practise the skill. This collaborative stage allows students to engage in the learning process, ask questions and [receive immediate feedback](#).

It is important in this stage to ensure that your students have a good understanding of what they are about to complete independently and can be very helpful for ironing out misconceptions.

Step three: You do

Finally, it's time to hand it over to your students. They practise the skill independently, while you observe and guide as needed. This stage allows students to apply their knowledge and build confidence in their abilities. Some students may feel confident completing the "You do" step quickly, whereas for others, this will require bravery and perseverance. To keep Adaptive Teaching in mind during this stage, check with students how they are managing with the task. Some may need some individual extra prompting and support to guide them along.

Recommended reading:

- [How to model a thought process for students](#)
- [Rosenshine's fifth Principle of Instruction: Practise new material](#)
- [Developing independent learners](#)

FAQ

A massive thanks to [Jade Pearce](#), Director of Professional Development at Greenwood Academies Trust and author of [What Every Teacher Needs to Know](#), for answering these frequently asked questions.

What are the main components of Adaptive Teaching?

The three main components of Adaptive Teaching are:

1. Setting clear learning intentions
2. Assessing students' learning during lessons
3. Adapting your teaching based on these assessments

A broader definition may also include adapting your teaching to meet students' needs before the lesson.

What are some popular strategies for Adaptive Teaching?

Mini whiteboards and Cold-Calling are popular strategies to assess students' understanding and ability.

Strategies for adapting after assessment tend to focus on providing either more challenge or more support. This includes scaffolding, extra time and practice, or working with the Teaching Assistant.

Are there any traps to avoid with Adaptive Teaching?

The three most common Adaptive Teaching misconceptions are:

- That it means planning multiple different lessons for one class – in reality, it's about pre-empting students' potential ceiling.
- That you have to adapt every single thing – some things need rehearsal rather than adaptation.
- That adaptation is only for students with SEND – you may be more likely to adapt for them, but this isn't always the case.



What is the role of Explicit Instruction in Adaptive Teaching?

Re-teaching something your students didn't understand the first time around is part of Adaptive Teaching. Explicit Instruction is an important part of this, requiring you to strip the definition down completely and being clearer in the way you explain it.

What is the difference between Adaptive Teaching and Responsive Teaching?

While these words are often used interchangeably, to clarify the difference:

- Responsive Teaching means setting lesson objectives, assessing against these, then responding to assessments live in the lesson.
- Adaptive Teaching is a wider term. It includes the definition of Responsive Teaching, but also thinking about adaptations prior to the lesson.

FURTHER READING

If you want to learn more about Adaptive Teaching and how to use it in your classroom, you may be interested in [our Adaptive Teaching: Questions and Scaffolding CPD workshop](#).

Here are some of our favourite additional resources:

- TandTeaching – [The Educational Podcast: TandTeaching chats with... Rachel Ball](#)
- [Moving from 'Differentiation to 'Adaptive Teaching'](#) on the EEF blog
- [LIVE: 7 ways to demonstrate ADAPTIVE TEACHING](#) from Petite Primary
- EEF Learning Behaviours specialist and secondary school SENCo, Kirsten Mould, explores [the concept of Adaptive Teaching](#).
- TES EXPLAINS: [What is Adaptive Teaching?](#)

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