

## SUPPORTING NEURODIVERSITY IN ONLINE TEACHING



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### Introduction

'Neurodiversity' describes the different ways brains develop, which result in different strengths and challenges related to thinking and learning. Some people call these differences 'different educational needs', 'special educational needs' or 'additional support needs'. You may have heard of conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Continuum or Dyslexia. Learning about specific conditions can help teachers, but it is important not to stereotype or label learners – all learners can show neurodiversity at times, especially in new situations. Neurodiversity is not the same as disability – some neurodivergent learners may have disabilities but others may not. We hope these ideas help you to make your remote teaching more supportive and encouraging for neurodivergent learners.

### Getting started

Remote online teaching is a great opportunity to increase inclusivity for neurodivergent learners and to try out differentiation in your lessons. First, you need to get to know your learners – this is the most important starting place. Speak to learners and their parents or guardians and find out the strengths and challenges that learners are experiencing, as well as the support that is available in the home or other places. Make a list of what the learner can do and enjoys doing, and then start looking for solutions to problems they are having. This is the beginning of what is called an 'individual support plan' or ISP.

### Help learners focus

Many learners will have problems focusing during an online lesson, some more than others. You can help them by structuring your materials and lesson in these ways.

- Send materials before lessons to give learners preparation time, either alone or with help.
- Use routines to reduce anxiety and increase clarity – for example, how you start and end a class, how you give instructions, how you share handouts.
- Use fun sounds and images to show topic changes or important pieces of information and bring focus back, e.g. a picture and sound of a gong or a splash.
- Control the use of the chat box as this can be quite distracting for many learners.
- Watch your learners to see when they become distracted and give them frequent breaks.
- Record online classes if possible – video recaps can be really helpful for learners who may have lost attention during part of the lesson.
- Change activities and interaction patterns frequently (but not too fast!) to help keep the lesson moving and help learners stay focused.

### Differentiate your teaching

Differentiation means that all learners work towards the same learning outcome, but learners are given choices about how they respond in terms of the level, the resources used and the way they do the activity.

- Give options for learning about new topics or language points. For example, with a new piece of grammar students can watch a video, work through a problem with a partner or read about it alone.
- A choice board is a grid divided into nine squares with nine options that learners can choose from. These can include options for responses such as drawing, writing, moving, solving problems, working alone or working together.
- Try differentiating the grouping of learners in breakout rooms – you can form groups of learners with similar levels and/or interests, or you can group learners in mixed ability and/or interest groups.
- Differentiate the challenge levels of activities – the language point could be the same for everyone, but some learners could be completing a gap-fill while other learners use the language point in a paragraph.

### Increase the accessibility of your materials and resources

Increasing accessibility of resources for visually and hearing-impaired learners can be helpful for everyone, especially neurodivergent learners. Here are some ideas:

- Avoid images of text which cannot be highlighted or copied into a dictionary, translator or screen-reader.
- Use of coloured text helps some people learn but it hinders others. Make sure you understand how your students react to coloured text.
- Use audio and text together. When explaining something verbally, back it up with a picture. Turn captions on when you show a video and add captions or alt text to pictures on the screen.
- Use sans serif fonts and do not overload PowerPoint screens with detailed text.

### Use a strengths-based approach

Neurodivergent learners can bring a lot of strengths into the online classroom, including creativity, enthusiasm, non-linear thinking, strong focus and recall, while still experiencing challenges with the lesson. It's important that we see those challenges as teaching problems to be solved, not as problems within the learner. We should always find ways to change online teaching and learning to support the needs of the learner, not try to change the learner to fit into the online classroom.

### Useful links

- Four ways to support neurodiversity in the classroom <https://bit.ly/RTTUKFIETNeuro>
- Keeping learners' attention in remote lessons <https://bit.ly/RTTVoicesRT>
- Maintaining student motivation <https://bit.ly/RTTSSMotivation>
- Inclusion in remote teaching contexts <https://bit.ly/RTTInclusiveteaching>