Differentiated instruction in Japanese language classes

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Abstract

This paper introduces differentiated instruction (DI), a widely used approach in primary and secondary schools in the United States and elsewhere, to the community of Japanese language teachers at all levels including universities. Based on the premise that all learners are different, DI makes it possible for teachers to provide opportunities for students with different readiness, interests and learning needs to perform at their best, so that learners can learn the most appropriate content through the most effective processes, producing the best products. This presentation introduces the rationale and components of DI as well as a few examples at university and high school levels. It also discusses issues and questions about DI.

Key words

differentiated instruction, content, process, products, assessment

日本語のクラスにおける区別化指導

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要旨

本稿では、大学を含むあらゆるレベルの日本語教師を対象に、アメリカやその他の国の初中等教育で広く実践されている区別化(DI)と呼ばれる指導法を紹介する。学習者がそれぞれ違った個人であるという前提のもとに教師は、DIを通じて、異なるレディネス、興味や学習ニーズを持つ生徒が、自分の能力を最大限に発揮できるように仕向けることができ、区別化された指導を受けた学習者は、各々にふさわしい内容を最も効果的なプロセスで学習し、最良のプロダクトを生み出すことができる。本稿は、DIの理論を紹介し、何をどのようにして区別化するのかを説明した上で、大学や高校での実践例を報告し、DIの主要な問題点や疑問点についても論じる。

キーワード

区別化指導、内容、プロセス、プロダクト、評価

Issues and rationale

Regardless of the level and type of school—primary, secondary or tertiary, regular or Japanese language school—our Japanese classes are made up of a variety of students. Our students vary in their cultural and language backgrounds, family histories and educational experiences. Their aptitude for learning languages and styles of learning may differ, too, and the Japanese language proficiencies they bring to their class, unless they are in a basic introductory course, differ also. Our students are all very different individuals.

We have observed that, despite using the curriculum, textbook and teaching philosophy, outcomes differ for every class. There may be several reasons for this, but the most likely is the difference among students and the combinations of differences that students bring to class. The differences in proficiency grow larger as students advance in their study of the language. In upper-level courses the differences have grown so large that sometimes it becomes impossible for every student to make progress if they are all taught in the same way. In this presentation I would like to discuss differentiated instruction (DI), which could help students increase their Japanese proficiency while using our limited time and resources effectively.

Rebecca Alber summarised the rationale for DI when she stated: "Equal education is not all students getting the same, but all students getting what they need. Approaching all learners the same academically doesn't work. We have to start where each child is in his learning process in order to authentically meet his academic needs and help him grow … equality is about meeting the needs of the individual" (2010). This statement captures the essence of DI. Learners are all different individuals and they learn differently; equality of education does not mean treating and teaching everyone in the same way but providing opportunities for everyone to learn in the most effective and the most appropriate way for each. In fact, research has shown that students are more successful in school and find it more satisfying if they are taught in ways that are responsive to their readiness levels (see Beecher and Sweeny 2008; Stavroula et al. 2011).

This belief is the foundational premise of DI. This is important to note because I have been told more than a few times by colleagues in Japan that the philosophy of DI cannot be applied to teaching in Japan because all learners in a class must be treated "equally," namely, given the same treatment and taught in the same way.

What is DI?

Many school websites cite a definition of DI attributed to Carol Tomlinson: "A flexible approach to teaching in which the teacher plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and in response to student differences in readiness, interests, and learning needs." DI is an approach to teaching, not a method. Much of the content of this presentation builds on ideas from Tomlinson and others who have been researching and practicing DI in classrooms at all levels and in all locales.

Components of DI: students and instruction

Three traits among learners require differentiation of curricular elements (Theisen 2002). The table below presents these traits and curricular elements.

Students	Noun-modifying phrase
Readiness	Content
Interests	Process
Learning needs	Product

Theisen calls the learners' traits "Differentiate Why?" and the curricular elements, "Differentiate What?"

Components of DI: learner traits

An appropriate execution of DI requires that we find out and consider learners' differences in readiness, interests and learning needs. We will look at each of the learner traits and curriculum elements individually.

Readiness

Readiness refers to what students know, understand and can do now. Students' current proficiency level, skills, content knowledge and understanding of content are included in readiness, but readiness is not the same as or limited to student ability. Rather, readiness means more general preparedness.

Interests

Interests include students' interest in content such as the knowledge of specific topics and skills they want to gain from instruction.

Learning needs

Learning needs include learning profile, learner background and pace of study. Learning profile encompasses several aspects: learning styles (auditory learner, visual learner or motor skill learner); motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic, instrumental or integrative motivation, intensity); personality (introverted or extroverted, risk-taking, tolerant of ambiguity); and learning environment (space size, quietness level). Student background includes cultural background (ethnicity and linguistic background, including heritage learners and previous study); and family background (socio-economic background, family configuration, familial attitude towards learning). In addition, learners may have handicaps such as a disability or disorder; alternatively, they may be gifted. All these differences result in differences in learning needs. Learners also differ in pace of study or learning speed. Learning pace may be affected by differences in cognitive ability, especially among young learners.

It is extremely important for instructors to know about the learner differences discussed above if one of our teaching goals is to teach everyone to attain the best proficiency they can.

Components of DI: curricular elements

What to differentiate?

1. **Content → What**
   Related to objectives; often based on standards
2. **Process → How**
   Activities, tasks, grouping and length of time
3. **Product → Assessment**
   Outcomes that are to be assessed

The three components of DI relating to curricular elements are content, process and product. "Content" is what we teach; "process" relates to how we teach; and "product" refers to assessment.

Content

Content is what the teacher plans to teach to attain objectives. Each course has instructional goals, which should be the same for all learners because they define the reason for the course. However, there is always more than one way to attain those goals. Unit objectives, weekly objectives and daily objectives all lead to the attainment of goals, and it is possible to vary objectives according to learner traits; namely, students' readiness, interest and learning needs. Content as well as objectives can be differentiated according to how well a student understands a concept and what their skill levels are. Lesson plans and teaching materials should reflect these differences.

An example of differentiated content can be found in Technical Japanese (JAPN422), at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), my university. Despite its title, the topics dealt with in the course span a variety of disciplines including science and technology, health science, humanities and social sciences. This course is one of the most difficult to teach because cohort comprises a variety of backgrounds and proficiency levels. This variation has increased recently, because budget cuts and cancellation of courses have compelled some students to enrol despite their lack of readiness. This course has been taught by three instructors in the last several years and each has taught the course differently, but all agree that differentiated instruction was necessary.

When I last taught this course, I conducted a pre-test composed of some items from previous JLPT Levels 3 and 2, the Simple Proficiency-Oriented Test (SPOT), and kanji reading and writing tasks. The ten students in this course fell roughly into two groups: four heritage background students, and six students who had passed Advanced Japanese (JAPN302). Among the latter, some attained good grades in the course but others barely passed. The three course goals were the same for all the students: to develop some reading strategies appropriate to their levels; to be able to summarise information obtained from reading passages and present it all to their classmates both in speech and in writing; and to increase their knowledge of and ability to use kanji and kanji compounds, mostly in comprehension. The objectives for each student were different according to their proficiency levels and their area of study and interests.

The class met twice a week in three-class cycles. One group met in class to study using a shared textbook, while the other group went to the computer lab to read individual reading materials. During the next class, the groups swapped activities—the first group went to the lab to do individualised work, while the second group came to class to work with a shared textbook, different to the other group. In the third class, all students came to class and presented their readings to the entire class. This cycle was repeated until the end of semester. Below is a chart of the cycle which started during the second week of semester (Diagram 1).

Diagram 1: Class schedule

週／曜日	クラス内容 **Section 1**(**6**名)	クラス内容 **Section 2**(**4**名)
1–火	コースの説明、プリテスト(SPOT、JLPT、漢字)	
1–木	読み物とプロジェクトの説明: インターネット情報	
2–火	教科書　第4課	Lab 1: 読み物の選択、決定
2–木	Lab 1: 読み物の選択、決定	教科書　第2章　ノート・テイキング
3–火	発表（読み物の内容）; 書類提出	
3–木	Lab 2: 読み物1	Lab 2: 読み物1
4–火	教科書　第6課	Lab 3: 読み物1
4–木	Lab 3: 読み物1	教科書　第3章　リーディングの基本スキル
5–火	読み物1発表(5人)	
5–木	教科書　第9課	Lab 4: 読み物2
6–火	Lab 4: 読み物2	教科書　第4章　より深いリーディング
6–木	読み物1発表(5人)	
7–火	教科書　第10課	Lab 4: 読み物2
7–木	Lab 5: 読み物2	教科書　第8章　ライティングの基本スキル
8–火	読み物2発表(5人)	

Next to the chart are directions given to students on the procedure for individual reading.

このクラスでは自由課題の読み物を四つ選んで読みます。

1. 読み物の分野とトピックを選びなさい。分野は自分の専攻と関係のあるものを少なくとも二つ選んでください。残りの二つは、自分の専攻分野でも、違う分野でもかまいません。分野を選んだら、次にトピックを決めてください。
2. インターネット検索をして記事を選びます。二つか三つ、適切なものを選んで、その分野、トピック、URLを日本語の電子メールでkataoka@csulb.eduに送ってください。その時、一番興味のあるものから順番に1、2、3と番号をつけてください。教師が内容をみて難易度や長さが適当であると判断した場合には1から順番に読んでもらいます。もし適当ではないと判断した場合には、その他の記事を探して読むように言います。

The following is the format of the reports students wrote after reading their articles and before making presentations to their class. After their presentation, students quizzed the class to see if their presentation had been comprehensible to all classmates.

レポート#_____(読んだ記事のコピーを添付してください。)

氏名:_____ 提出日:_____

1. タイトル
2. キーワード(5つまで)
3. 要旨(100字以内で)
4. この記事を読んで自分が新しく得た知識
5. この記事から学んだ漢字と単語(自分が覚えたいものを20書きなさい。)
6. 発表のまとめ:上の3、4、5を含めて5分以内の発表にまとめなさい。図や表も用意しなさい。
7. 他の学生のためのハンドアウト
   (1)内容をまとめたレジュメ
   (2)覚えると役に立つ漢字／語彙5つ
   (3)理解できたかどうかのクイズ(5問まで。)

In all upper-level Japanese classes at CSULB, students are required to complete projects, research or reading reports. They are given a choice of topics, procedures and formats such as written, oral and multimedia presentations. This is a reflection of our effort to differentiate content.

Process

The second component of DI is process. Process refers to how one teaches: namely, differentiation of activities, tasks and grouping of students. Activities and tasks can be ordered, for example, from concrete to abstract, from simple to complex, from structured to open, and from less to more independent. Depending on the students (and often groups of students), different activities and task types can be assigned, rather than assigning the entire class the same activity or task.

Multiple intelligence activities can be used to differentiate on the basis of learning profile. Different teaching materials with the same or similar content can be used. For example, some reading texts can be used as is, but others given to different groups can be modified, semi-authentic texts with slightly less-complicated sentences and fewer kanji.

Auditory learners may learn sentence patterns via listening and speaking practices, while visual learners may learn the same structural patterns by reading them.

Group work is indispensable in foreign language classes because of its communicative nature. Differentiation can be used for pair and group practices, where students can be grouped according to their readiness, interest or learning profile. In all cases, similar students can be grouped together, or different students can be grouped together. The latter option may seem counterproductive, but it is useful because it can expose students to different ideas and learning styles. Some students work better alone, and others work better in groups. In order to satisfy all students' needs, it is mandatory that class work consists of "ebb and flow" of experiences (Tomlinson 1995), moving from individual work to group work to whole-class work, then back to group work or individual work.

Another factor in the differentiating process is scaffolding. Scaffolding is "an instructional method whereby the teacher provides temporary support while employing strategies designed to help students accept responsibility for their learning" (Tennessee State Board of Education 2001), based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD (Vygotsky 1978). ZPD concerns the distance between what the learner can do alone and what they cannot do even with help. The ZPD itself is the area covering what the learner cannot do alone but could with help from a teacher, or in collaboration with peers. Scaffolding is used to help and guide students to fill the ZPD. Since the ZPD differs greatly from student to student, differentiating the type and amount of scaffolding is essential, particularly when teaching a class with highly diverse students.

An example of DI in process is seen in a Recycle unit developed by Michiko Schricker while teaching at a Saturday Japanese school in California. In a section of this unit, she prepares the students through pre-reading activities introducing the process of a science experiment recycling Styrofoam. The pre-reading activities include discussing recycling, viewing a video of recycling Styrofoam, introducing and practicing new vocabulary (both input and output activities), and verbally explaining the procedure of recycling Styrofoam using pictures, new vocabulary and sentence structures already familiar to the students. Schricker then differentiates the next activity of letting students explain the recycling procedure in several ways, depending on the students' ability and rate of progress. Options including matching the pictures and sentences, filling in the blanks in sentences which explain the recycling procedure, writing sentences on their own, or verbally explaining the recycling procedure.

After concluding the above activities, Schricker presents a passage that explains how Styrofoam is recycled. The global reading activities (choosing a title and matching paragraph numbers to the topic of each paragraph summarised in one sentence) are the

same for all students. The detailed reading activity is differentiated according to how much understanding is expected of each student. Schricker developed three levels of reading comprehension activities: the simplest is to fill in vocabulary to complete a summary of the reading, the second is to complete sentences to write the summary, and the third, to summarise the recycling process without assistance. Students learn in Japanese about recycling and can tell others about the process, but in different ways. In addition, those activities are done in groups or in pairs, unless students prefer to work individually.

Product

Product refers to outcomes that are used for assessment. In DI, differentiating product is extremely important because we begin with the premise that students' learning objectives may differ. Since assessment of the course goes hand-in-hand with objectives, students with different learning objectives should naturally be given different assessment.

Products can vary. Some examples include presentations, reports, posters, journals, films, discussions and debates, in addition to the more traditional interpretive tasks of reading and listening. The instructor can use DI by not only providing a variety of products but also giving students their choice of products to be evaluated, based on such factors as students' language background, cultural background, interests, learning styles, and language proficiency. Grading options enter the picture also. We do not want to grade the outcomes too easily or too harshly, so we must find an optimal level that is challenging but not impossible for any student.

Differentiated assessment

Assessment plays an invaluable role in DI because it forms the basis for determining content, process and product. Chapman and King state, 'Differentiated assessment is an ongoing process through which teachers gather data before, during and after instruction using multiple formative and summative tools' (2012, 1) to identify learners' needs and strengths. Let us look at four topics concerning assessment.

Differentiated Assessment

1. Constant assessment
2. Assessment appropriate to individual learner
3. Assessment with options
4. Assessment that reflects objectives

The first topic is constant assessment. In DI, we need to assess students constantly, beginning with a pre-instruction assessment. Pre-assessment has a two-fold purpose: one is to grasp the learners' needs, and the other to set objectives. Among those of us who teach Japanese in secondary and tertiary schools, our greatest concern regarding readiness is to find the learner's proficiency level and, when dealing with higher level courses, deal with kanji issues. Because kanji are also vocabulary, writing Japanese depends heavily on their use, and so are intrinsically linked to proficiency. In fact, differing levels of kanji knowledge is one of the main reasons for differentiating instruction in upper-level classes.

In order to use DI, one needs to conduct frequent on-going assessments, both formative and summative. This is for the purpose of creating or choosing activities and tasks that are appropriate to learners and to monitor learner growth. These assessments should be both frequent and appropriate to individual learners. However, since it is nearly impossible to differentiate assessment for each individual, one may want to divide the class into groups according to language proficiency, language skills, cultural background and, in the case of younger learners, cognitive ability.

Students may be given assessments with a variety of choices. For instance, the learner may choose the task, work style, assessment tools or evaluation format, such as self- or peer-evaluation. The learner should be given opportunities to express or present what they have learned in class and can do in the best way they can. Needless to say, whatever the form or the tool, assessments should be able to measure how objectives have been met.

An example of a traditional but differentiated assessment is a kanji quiz. Since students' knowledge of and skills in using kanji can be so diverse, especially in upper-level Japanese courses, it is often not fair to require all students to learn the same amount of kanji. After the student and the instructor have decided the level of involvement in kanji and how much the student is to learn, a kanji quiz can take various forms. For instance, some students may be required to learn to read and write all the kanji and kanji compounds introduced in class; others, to read all the kanji but to write only selected kanji compounds; and the rest, only to read them. If all students are required only to read the kanji, then each group can be differentiated by giving them full credit by completing 100%, 90% or 80% of the quiz. One group may be required, in addition to writing the reading of the kanji, to write in Japanese the meaning of the kanji compounds, while the other group may be asked to match the words with meanings written in a different column.

Another example of a rather traditional but differentiated assessment is from my course Japan: Its Land, People, and Culture (JAPN452). This is a content-based instruction (CBI) course that takes up topics such as Japanese geography, food, industries, dwellings and leisure activities. The final exam gives students choices of questions to answer. Below is an example, with rubric omitted:

> 次の質問の中から二つを選んで、それぞれ300〜400字で答えてください。内容の正確さ(1/4)、日本語の正確さ(1/4)、構成(1/4)、及び説明の論理性(1/4)で採点します。(20x2=40)
>
> 1. 日本の川はどうして短くて急流が多いのですか。また、そのために、どんな利点や問題点がありますか。
> 2. 今多くの国立公園が直面している問題は何ですか。それはどうすれば解決できるでしょうか。
> 3. 食料自給率が低いのはなぜ問題なのでしょうか。
> 4. 環境にやさしく、エネルギーを無駄にしない住居というのはどのような家ですか。

In addition to giving choices, this type of writing can be differentiated in several ways: asking for longer or shorter responses; giving simple or detailed instructions or giving hints; preparing different rubrics; or, instructing students to use certain structures or paragraphs. The task can be made more creative, therefore differentiated, by giving situations such as having to write a petition letter opposing a dam, asking the government for more funds for maintaining the national parks, or arguing for the free import of foodstuff at an international free trade conference.

In individual oral interviews, which are conducted at the end of the fall semester in Advanced Spoken Japanese, we ask students a list of questions such as those seen in the box below.

JAPN311プロチーブメント・テスト　(抜粋)

- 自己紹介をする時にはどんなことを話しますか。
- いつでも/どんな場合でも同じですか。
- *それぞれの場面でどのように違った自己紹介をするか説明してください。*
- ○○さんの趣味について教えてください。
- どんな人がその趣味が好きだ思いますか。どうしてそう思いますか。
  詳しく説明してください。
- ご家族はどんな家族ですか。
- お母さんの趣味について教えてください。*その趣味についてもう少し詳しく教えて下さい。*
- 出身地はどこですか。○○さんは、ずっと▼▼で育ったんですか。▼▼はどんなところですか?
- *▼▼を知らない日本人に▼▼について分かり易く教えてあげてください。*
- ▼▼の自然環境は?そこの自然環境は守られて／*保護され*ていますか。*どうしてそう思いますか。*
- じゃあ、○○さんの経歴を教えてください。
- ○○さんは、どんな性格ですか。*そんな性格をどう思いますか。なぜですか。*
- 将来どんな仕事がしたいですか。そんな仕事は○○さんにむいていますか。*どうしてそう思いますか。*

それでは、次の場面で1分(2分)の自己紹介をしてください。(場面を英語で書いたカードを渡す。)

Differentiation takes place by asking the italicised questions to only those whose proficiency level was high when the course commenced. Those who began with lower proficiency may be asked italicised questions, but are not expected to answer them fully or appropriately. Since the weaker students do not respond to the same questions as the stronger students, using the same rubric for all the students does not penalise the weaker ones.

Issues and questions about DI

The fairness issue

Differentiated instruction is not free of issues and questions. One of the reservations about DI is philosophical. Japanese instructors, especially those from Japan, have voiced opinions such as, "We cannot teach students in one class differently, because it is not fair," and, "The administration would have a fit if they found out we are giving different teaching materials or tests, because that could lead to favouritism." Are we "allowed" to have different objectives for different students? Is it ethical to give assessments that are not exactly the same for everyone? Is it acceptable that students who are awarded an A for the course have a range of skills and abilities? Of these questions, the last is the toughest to address.

To these questions, we can ask, "Is it acceptable that students' readiness differs so much when they start a course?" It is of course ideal if all students share the same readiness and the same proficiency level when they enter a language course. Indeed, it is supposedly the same in introductory courses. However, as students progress in language study, uniformity across the cohort develops into diversity and this gap widens as the course progresses. It is not only proficiency level or readiness in general, but also students' level of interest and learning needs that change as they grow.

Assigning grades

Were we to give all our students the same objectives, teach them in the same way and assess them in the same way, it is obvious that weaker students would not be able to perform as well as those with much higher levels of proficiency. Since the content would be more difficult and they would not be ready for such a challenge, those students are doomed to receive a lower grade. If we focus on those who are lower in proficiency, then the more advanced students may not be learning anything new and would end up wasting valuable time to learn more and advance even further. Those students should be given more opportunities to learn. It is very difficult to see how filling these gaps can be unfair and lead to favouritism. I do believe DI is the fairest way to educate our students, and help them achieve their best.

One way to grade fairly is to consider giving three separate grades, which Tomlinson calls "3P grading". The three Ps stand for performance, process and progress. If we focus on performance, only those whose absolute proficiency levels are high to begin with can get good grades. However, if we consider process and progress, and if the learners are

guided through their work using DI, they have a good chance to receive high grades in these areas. Course grades could be a combination of the three.

Student concerns

When one tries to tell students that we do DI in class, some students may become unhappy. Among them are those taking the course for an easy A. As much as we do not want to believe that some students come to our classes with that sole motivation, such students do exist. I have had a few, and I had to tell them that one of the goals of the course was that students complete the course with more proficiency. Not every student was satisfied with that explanation, but everyone did agree to stay in class and put in an effort to improve.

Another group, although few in number, are Japanese heritage language learners (JHL). They have been raised speaking Japanese at home, but the amount of exposure to Japanese differs from student to student, as do their proficiency levels and skills. A couple of those students voiced the concern that their ability might be overestimated solely because they are JHL speakers and thus end up unfairly placed in a high-proficiency group which may disadvantage them in grading. It was not until I gave a pre-assessment test (composed of selected test items from the past Japanese Language Proficiency Test and a part of the final exam for the course) and told each student their result that they were convinced that their Japanese ability was not overestimated.

In addition, giving the students on the first day of instruction some information on DI and how the instructor would assess them usually works. I also have students sign a contract stating that they understand the goals of the course and that they are willing to work with the DI format, including differentiated home assignments, projects and tests. This should protect the instructor's position.

Limitations of DI

Unfortunately there are limitations to DI. It is not possible to employ DI when the differences among students in readiness and learning needs are too great. For instance, a group of children with a great discrepancy in age in one class, such as five to twelve, cannot be taught effectively even using DI due to differences in cognitive ability. This issue is often encountered in Saturday Japanese schools in the United States.

A huge gap in proficiency levels among students cannot be filled by DI. I have taught an upper-level Japanese course in which students' proficiency levels spanned from Novice High to Advanced Mid according to the ACTFL proficiency scale. DI cannot work in a class with this much of a gap. Even if the gap is not so wide, it is nearly impossible to teach a class of Intermediate Low learners with a few true beginners. There is a limit to differentiation.

Teacher workload

Differentiated instruction requires teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and adjust the curriculum and presentation of information to learners rather than expect students to modify themselves for the curriculum. This means constant work on the part of the teacher.

It is said that DI is not something extra you do but is a part of everyday teaching that every teacher should do. Regardless of what our pro-DI colleagues say, learning to incorporate DI into everyday teaching is time-consuming, and means a much bigger workload compared to traditional teaching. Preparing and giving pre-tests (a part of which could be an oral proficiency interview with each student), grading them, making a form for and reading personal background information sheets, and grouping the students into two or more groups is time-consuming at the beginning of the semester when we are at our busiest. Once the term starts, the teacher has to prepare differentiated teaching materials and home assignments, followed by differentiated assessment tools. In addition, the instructor may not be able to use the teaching materials prepared prior to the new term, because they may find that the student population is very different from their original assumptions.

There is, however, a silver lining in teacher workload in DI: the instructor does not have to fret about having to give an A to a strong student whose proficiency was higher than the course goal to begin with and who never studied throughout the term. The instructor does not have to agonise about what to do with students lacking readiness who, no matter how hard they work and how much they improve, could not get an A if they were in a traditional course. The student who shows great improvement over the term could earn a high grade they could never attain otherwise, which in turn might give them more confidence and motivation to work harder. It is a well-known fact that success is the best motivational factor for even further success. That is perhaps the greatest reward for the teacher, which makes some extra work worthwhile.

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Note: These resources are all available online, having been chosen with busy teachers in mind.

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