



# Teaching On Target

A high school English teacher's  
guide to the  
Zone of Proximal Development

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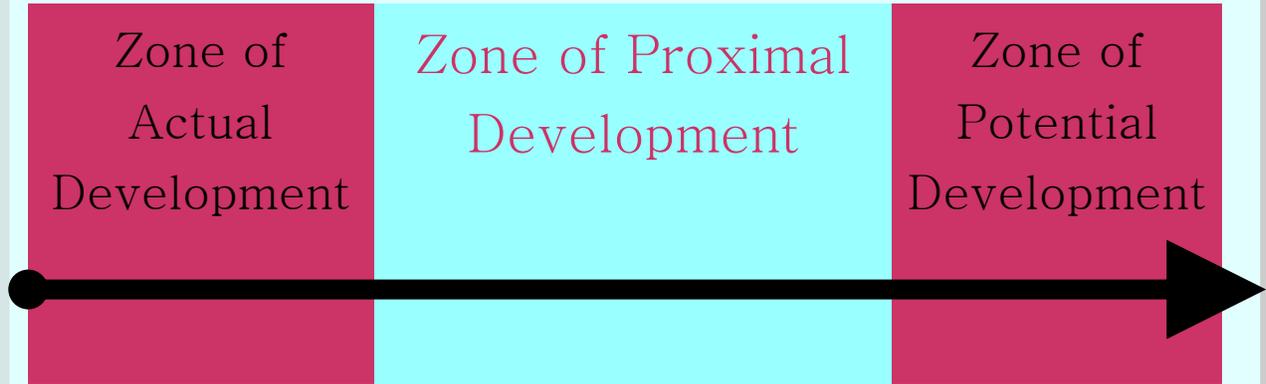
# Introduction

By high school, students have gone through quite a few different teachers and have experienced many different teaching styles. High school teachers cannot be sure of what their students have learned in the past or what they are prepared to learn in a high school class. The key to teaching this varied group of students is to discover their Zone of Proximal Development, the place where they learn best.

## Why teach in the zone?

Determining each students' Zone of Proximal Development will allow for more constructive differentiation and scaffolding. This will lead to more productive learning for each student!

# Zone of Proximal Development



Level of Actual Development: Tasks that the student can do without assistance. Tasks that the student has mastered.

- Teaching in this zone will cause boredom because the student has already mastered the subject.

Zone of Proximal Development: Tasks that the student finds difficult but can accomplish (McLeod, 2012).

- Teaching in this zone is most effective because students complete challenging tasks and learn new things.

Zone of Potential Development: Tasks that the student can do with assistance (Lui, 2012). Tasks that a student cannot do even with assistance.

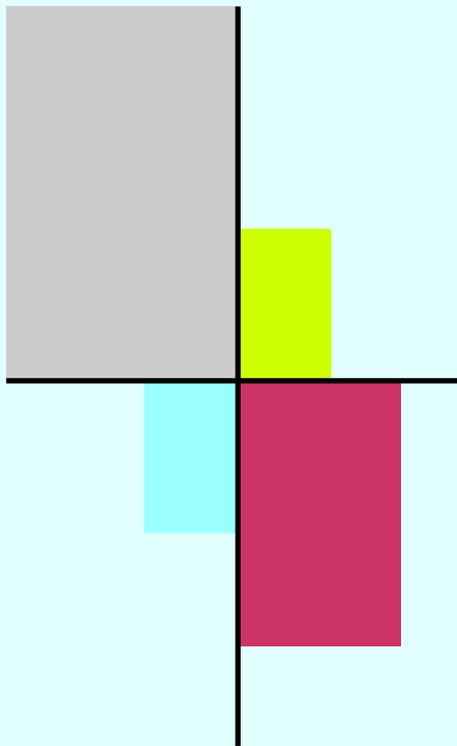
- Teaching in this zone will cause anxiety because a student will not be able to complete their tasks.

(Sanchez)	Low Challenge	High Challenge
Low Skill	Apathy	Anxiety
High Skill	Boredom	Learning

# Are you teaching in the zone?

Discerning the Zone of Proximal Development is important to implement **scaffolding** in your classroom. **Scaffolding** is the guidance that teachers offer students when students learn a new concept. The term “scaffolding” references the scaffolding that is placed around a building while it is being built. As construction is completed, the scaffolding is slowly taken away and moved upward. (Knestrick, 2013). In the same way, as students learn more, they need less teacher guidance and progress to more complex concepts and move upward.

Determining the Zone of Proximal Development requires you to examine each student individually, as each student has a different ZPD. You can use the checklist on the next page to determine if you are already teaching in the some or what steps you should take to help your students become better learners.



After determining the ZPD, **differentiation** can be implemented. Differentiation is a process modifies instruction for students of differing abilities in the same classroom. This maximizes student growth by teaching to their ZPD rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum (Huebner, 2010).

# Are you teaching in the zone?

Questions to Ask	Steps to Take	Purpose
What should my students be able to do at the end of the unit?	Look at your unit comprehensively and narrow down the learning goals.	Developing goals helps you stay on track when designing plans for individual students.
Do my students have the knowledge and skills to reach my goals?	Pretest before starting a unit to gauge students' knowledge.	Re-teaching material is unconstructive so knowing where your students are can help you differentiate their tasks. Teaching a concept that is beyond a student's reach will not result in good learning either.
Am I catering my instruction to different knowledge levels?	Group your students based on their knowledge and create slightly different lessons for each.	Differentiating learning based on knowledge level avoids re-teaching or teaching beyond a students' level.
Am I continually adjusting my instruction based on my observations?	Re-group students periodically based on their progress or lack thereof. Continually create new materials for the underperforming and overperforming students so they are challenged in their ZPD.	Students' ZPDs change as they learn more and become more competent. It is vital to continue assessing them. This allows you to differentiate based on their ZPD and provide appropriate scaffolding.
Am I providing feedback to students about their work?	Provide students with positive and negative feedback on their performances. Guide students where they are struggling.	Giving students a "heads-up" on where they are struggling allows them to work on these areas. Giving positive feedback gives students pride in completing a challenging task.

# How to use this guide: High School English and the ZPD

Using the Zone of Proximal Development in your classroom is easier than it seems. While the theory behind the ZPD is complex, the execution does not have to be. The first step on the first day of your classes is to pretest and assess where your students are in relation to what they are going to be learning in your classroom. This can include assessments over grammar, reading comprehension, MLA format, or text analysis.

The second step is to modify your lesson to meet the needs of students with different levels of prior knowledge and skills (differentiation). This will include building more support for students that need to be caught up (scaffolding). This will also include creating more complex reports or assignments for students who are already beyond the lessons you plan to teach.

The third step is to create large and small groups for collaboration purposes. If your lesson does not already include time for group work, now is the time to add it in. Learning how your students work individually and in large and small groups is important to understand how much they are learning and how they can apply it with others. More interaction with more competent peers and instructors also creates more meaningful learning for students (Lui, 2012).

During your unit, continue to assess students to be sure your scaffolding and differentiation methods are affective. Continually testing students will allow you to determine their changing Zones of Proximal Development and make you the most effective educator for your students.

# Examples of how to use the ZPD in a High School English Classroom

## Research Papers

Step One: Test students over MLA format. Ask them to tell you everything they know about research papers and how to write them. i.e. how should you embed a quote? What sort of things would you write a research paper about?

Step Two: Read the assessments and identify where **each student** is with research papers. Determine what information you need to cover with what students.

Step Three: Develop small groups based on the information that each student must acquire before writing a paper.

Step Four: Use the small groups to differentiate learning and scaffold for less able students. Use a whole-class group to give the students the assignment over research papers and to teach new information that all students must know.

Step Five: Provide extra help before, after, and during class to students who need help writing their paper. Be sure to check on **each student** and observe how they are using the information you gave them.



# References

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