

# The Importance of Differentiation in Supporting Diverse Learners

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## Abstract

Living in this changing world that requires frequent adaptations has affected most classrooms, which consist of students with different backgrounds, preferences, learning styles and different language proficiencies. Subsequently, teachers are faced with a challenge of meeting every individual student's needs and being able to accomplish that task requires more than just delivering a lecture. The solution to answering learners' needs is applying differentiation in mixed-ability classes where the teacher would be conscious of the diversity of learners and choose carefully the types of activities and materials that would be most engaging for them. As Tomlison (2001 cited in Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003) states, differentiated instruction (DI) is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse learners in classrooms. Although applying DI is crucial for every subject, the focus of this paper is on applying DI in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. The key findings from the literature review that make the application of differentiation essential in EFL classes will be provided. The findings will be targeting the reasons for applying DI, its huge importance for either more proficient or less proficient students, strategies used for DI, suitable activities that can be used in mixed ability classes and the main features of a differentiated lesson. Eventually, the aim of this paper is to provide research based responses to the issue of having diverse learners in the same class. Therefore, it is inevitable that lecturers apply differentiation, which regardless of its usefulness, is still considered an unknown field among local lecturers and researchers.

**Keywords:** Differentiated instruction, Mixed-ability, EFL classes, Diverse learners

## 1. Introduction

Teaching in modern classrooms consisting of great diversity of students entails teachers not only using more advanced methods of teaching and technologies to adapt to the requirements of a new era, but also adjusting to the diversity of students that are an inevitable part of today's classrooms. Differentiation puts the focus on learners and it is a learner centered approach that is aimed to help students succeed regardless of the differences. In order to reach every student in the classroom, the teacher should always have students' diversity in mind, starting from the planning stage to designing activities to be used in the classroom and the teaching process and their assessment. According to Tomlinson et al., 2003 (cited in Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, p.8), "students will engage more fully with learning and will learn more robustly when teachers proactively plan with their differences – as well as their similarities". Therefore, the "one size fits all" approach is not applicable in today's classrooms consisting of a mixture of students, whose needs cannot be satisfied with a few commonly used resources. In order to understand more clearly the main aim of differentiation, it is of vital importance to understand what it really means to differentiate instructions. Thus, the full definition of DI is that "a teacher proactively plans varied approaches to what students need to learn, how they will learn it and/or how they can express what they have learned" (Tomlinson, 2010, p. 155).

In this paper the focus will be on the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes and the application of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in such classes. The importance of applying DI is unquestionable for all other subjects, but in EFL classes not only can students be found with different kinds of needs, but the variance becomes even bigger because of their different English proficiencies. Although it is expected that language students who are grouped in the same classroom should have the same level of English proficiency, it is a common issue that ultimately those classrooms are again consisting of 'heterogeneous' groups rather than the 'homogeneous' groups teachers have planned their lessons for. Therefore, students are addressed as a group and not as the unique individuals they genuinely are.

The paper will cover aspects of the literature review from a research-based perspective and what respective scholars have discovered about the importance of DI and its application in the EFL classrooms. Although DI is a well researched topic among many scholars worldwide, it is still not well known for local scholars and lecturers; thus this paper will strive to provide essential information about the importance of DI and its application in the classroom, as well as offer useful conclusions and recommendations for teachers and researchers.

## 2. The Aim of paper

### 2.1. Description of a problem with diversity

Perceiving differentiation as a very useful and inevitable approach in every day teaching, this paper aims to

provide necessary information about its importance, usefulness and application in the EFL classroom. Language classes usually consist of mixed level and mixed- ability students that are grouped in one classroom despite their differences. DI tries to provide a solution to this issue without making it even more difficult for teachers, helping them teach “differently, smarter, –not harder” (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, p.3). Since in this changing world it seems very difficult to have homogeneous groups in one classroom, a need has arisen to solve the issue through differentiation. In order to reach every single student in the class and meet the diverse needs of those students, various learning opportunities should be offered.

### 2.2. Solutions to the problem

This paper will offer solutions to the uncertainty that exists among teachers in dealing with diverse students. This will be done in a way that does not require re-scheduling students, but keeping mixed-level students in the same class while helping both weaker and stronger students. Moreover, the teacher can aid those students who are behind because they do not have sufficient background information. The teacher can encourage those students to “move both backward and forward with essential content”, whereas with more proficient students who already have adequate knowledge about the topic, the teacher can help them “move beyond current learning expectations so that growth will continue” (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, p.8). As a result, DI provides solutions for all the sides involved in the learning – teaching process in order to achieve success and it puts a focus on dividing the duties among the learner and teacher because “the brain that does the work is the brain that learns” (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, p.3).

## 3. Reasons for Applying DI and its Importance

Although DI is very useful and supporting diverse learners in the classroom is essential, an ultimate solution to diversity can never be found because it is becoming more and more present, and as Griffin – the Teacher of the Year in the United States (1995, cited in Richardson, Morgan, Fleener, 2012), says

“There will never be a single solution that will be a perfect fit for our diverse society. Don’t wish for a unilateral answer to our educational dilemmas. Instead, we should work toward partnership of families, communities, and educators who will enjoy the process of problem solving” (p.317).

### 3.1. Learners’ Diverse Needs

Moreover, it is unnecessary to look for more reasons that diversity exists and that its application is a requirement because every lecturer is faced with diversity on a daily basis. Hall’s (2009) comparison of a classroom with a bus station is a very accurate association because in the classroom “student passengers arrive from a montage of backgrounds with very different needs” (p. 1) and as a guide the teacher is the one who should direct them according to learners’ individual needs. The lecturer’s failure in recognizing and dealing effectively with learners’ diversity will result in the learners’ failure, which will not only hinder them to succeed but even force them to go backwards.

### 3.2. DI and Students’ Learning

Furthermore, DI is important and crucial because it is directly linked to students’ learning. According to brain research, if the tasks are too difficult for the learner than the “brain ‘downshifts’ to the limbic area that does not think” whereas if the learners are provided with tasks that are easy for them than they “do not show thoughtful brain activity” (Tomlinson,2001, p.156). Consequently, what is suggested by scholars is that “only when tasks are moderately challenging for an individual does the brain ‘think’ in a way that prompts learning” (Tomlinson, 2001, p.156). Therefore, teachers with the help of DI can support diverse students’ learning by adapting the teaching materials to the students’ level of thinking and understanding. Teachers should work initially on understanding the distinctiveness of every student and plan the lessons accordingly.

## 4. Key Features of DI

In order to differentiate effectively, the teacher should differentiate instructions according to the model by Tomlinson that focuses on four classroom elements. According to the ‘Model of Differentiation’ by Tomlinson (1999, 2001, 2003 cited in Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011) the teacher can modify

“*content* (what students will learn or how they will gain access to what they are asked to learn), *process* (activities through which students make sense of or ‘come to own; essential content), *product* (how students demonstrate what they know, understand, and can do after extended period of learning) , and *affect* (attention to students’ feelings and emotional needs)” (pp. 12-13).

Differentiation of these four elements in the classroom should be done in line with the students’ “readiness, interest and learning profile” (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, p.13) in order to maximize the learners’ success and

achievement. The notion of ‘readiness’ means that the “difficulty of skills taught should be slightly in advance of the child’s current level of mastery” (Hall, Strangman, Mayer, 2003). This theory is based on the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Student ‘interest’ means taking into consideration what topics are of interest for each individual student and ‘learning profile’ has to do with students’ style of learning.

If all the key features of DI are applied carefully, they can ensure that the learning will take place in a diverse classroom. Introduction and application of DI in the classroom supports diverse learners and enhances their learning in a way that it modifies all the stages of a lesson according to students’ needs and their individual preferences. Taking into consideration the uniqueness of each student will be even more stimulating and motivating for them. However, teachers should not fall into the trap of the commonly held misconception that being able to meet students’ diverse needs and learning styles requires preparing specific modes for teaching every single notion. Consequently, “differentiation can be accomplished in small and subtle ways using student interests, cultural backgrounds, flexible grouping, visual and tactile experiences, and peer discussion that fit naturally into a lesson” (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009 cited in Richardson, Morgan, Fleener, 2012, p.342).

## 5. DI Lesson Plan and Differentiated Tasks

In different subjects there are different reasons for differentiation according to the nature of diversity and students’ needs and the teacher is the one who is responsible for recognizing the existing diversity and planning the lesson accordingly. Moreover, “the intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student’s growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is and assisting in the learning process.” (Hall, Strangman, Mayer, 2003). Only if the teacher has a clear idea about students’ needs can a solution be found. Similarly, if a doctor diagnoses a patient carefully an appropriate cure and treatment can be given; otherwise, if the ailment is not diagnosed accurately, whatever is done is worthless since nothing will have an effect. In language classrooms many issues have an influence on student learning. Apart from differentiating instructions in many fields and areas such as “differentiating learning style, language proficiency, background knowledge, readiness to learn” (Willoughby, 2005), in a language classroom all four language skills can be differentiated in order to ensure that students’ needs will be satisfactorily met. Murray (1985 cited in Spandel, 2001) indicates the importance of differentiating writing skills by stating “we don’t teach writing effectively if we try to make all students and all writing the same” (p. 271). Students are all different and even individual students change their own preferences and interests with time. Moreover, Murray adds that “we must seek, nurture, develop and reward difference” (p.271). Other scholars indicate meeting students’ diverse needs in reading skills (Richardson, Morgan, Fleener, 2012). Also, it is of a crucial importance that teachers in English language classes learn about students’ language and cultural differences, so they can “provide instruction that encourages acceptance of native languages and cultures while facilitating the learning of English” (Au, 2001; Mohr, 2004 cited in Richardson, Morgan, Fleener, 2012, p.333).

### 5.1. Lesson Plan

When all the prerequisites are met and when the teacher is aware of the composition of the students in a particular classroom, then the next step is designing a differentiated lesson plan, which is a vital element in diverse classrooms. The model presented below of a differentiated lesson plan for a language classroom takes into account specific student profiles and differentiates for different learner needs. In a DI lesson plan the content is the same for all learners, but just the way it is presented for students is different. “DI does not change what is taught; it changes how it is taught” (Hall, 2009, p. 1). Differentiated lesson plan incorporates key elements of DI that are *content* (What is taught?), *process* (How is it taught?) and *product* (evaluation). In a DI lesson plan it is required that the diversity in assignments and products allow students to work at their own level of challenge and achieve their own levels of success. Differentiation is not about creating individualized lesson plans for each individual student, rather it helps support diversity within a single plan. In order to help students learn at their own pace, students can be divided in groups according to their level of English proficiency such as advanced, intermediate and basic group. By following the steps of a DI lesson plan and the principles of DI, at the end of a lesson all the students will arrive at the concept that the teacher wants to teach by following their own ways of learning. Effective learning and teaching will be possible, by having the student in the center.

“Through differentiation combined with curriculum layering, teachers can create a student-centered classroom that is supportive to each student by providing choice and immediate feedback in a wide variety of activities and assessments” (Beach, 2010).

Students can be aided in the learning process if the focus is on their level of knowledge, rather than on the teacher’s insistence on teaching them according to the expected level. By offering different opportunities to students, everyone can find their own path and will not be lost in an unknown environment that does not suit their needs, level of knowledge or interests.

### Differentiated Lesson Plan Format

Title of Lesson	Title that indicated the topic/subject/context of the lesson
By	Your name, city, country
Student Profile	Your student's age, grade, proficiency level
Learning profile	Learning style: visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic
Class Profile	Class size and duration
Target Language	List the target language structures (i.e. target grammar, structures and vocabulary)
Target Content	List the subject area or cultural content that students will learn through English, and indicate which language skills this lesson will focus on building: listening, speaking, reading, or writing.
Objectives	List the objectives that students should meet by the end of the lesson. Start with "By the end of the lesson, students will/should be able to..." Consider process as well as content goals and objectives. Process: "Participate in situational role plays" "Contribute orally to classroom and group discussions", "To listen effectively in high-content situations." Content: Refer to Bloom's Taxonomy
Materials	List everything the teacher needs to implement the lesson.
Source	Write down the source of the text or materials being used.
Procedures	Describe the various steps/tasks in the activity. Next to each step or task, please indicate the approximate length of time for that activity .
Warm-up	Description of pre-listening or pre-reading activities that prepare students for the listening or reading input.
Presentation	Description of how the teacher will give listening or reading input, check comprehension of input, build listening or reading skills, "teach" target language structures. In this part, the teacher should present the target language structures within a meaningful/communicative context.
Practice	Description of post-listening or post-reading activities which can be either speaking or writing activities. These activities should be focused on practicing the target language structures in context.
Evaluation	Description of how the teacher will assess if students have met the stated objectives for the lesson. It could be another activity, or it could be a description of how the teacher should assess if the objectives are met during the presentation and practice steps.
Follow-up	Description of follow-up activity, such as homework. It should practice the target language structures in this lesson and/or connect to the next lesson in the unit. This section should have some explanation of the connection of this lesson to the next lesson.
<b>Note 1: All activities follow best practices in TESOL</b>	
<b>Note 2: Please indicate the approximate length of time for each activity in your lesson.</b>	
<b>Comments/Reflection</b>	

(Adapted from: Valais & Haddaway, 2010 - Differentiated Lesson Plan Format handout; Methods Course I: Survey of Best Practices in TESOL)

#### 5.2. Tasks

In an attempt to get the best out of students, the DI lesson plan is accompanied with differentiated tasks. Some tasks that are used in a differentiated curriculum are the ones suggested by Bowler & Parminter (2002) and are called 'tiered tasks' and 'bias tasks'. As stated by them, if there is a "long, complex text [then] a simple task makes the listening or reading achievable for weaker students. With a shorter, simpler text, the task can be more demanding" (Bowler & Parminter, 2002, p.59). According to this principle, the tasks in the course books should be adapted and modified to be suitable for mixed-level students in the classroom.

Additionally, Sousa & Tomlinson (2011), mention other tasks for differentiation such as 'learning contracts', which are the strategies that incorporate learner readiness. "Contracts are helpful to the teacher because they allow practice targeted at student's needs" (p.101). Similar to Bowler & Parminter's tasks, Sousa & Tomlinson suggest 'tiering' tasks which allow "all students to work with the same content but at a degree of difficulty that provides an appropriate level of challenge" (p.102). Furthermore, they also mention activities for "differentiating content, process, and product based on student interest" (p.134). Some activities of differentiation for each category include:

Differentiating Content Based on Interest

- Use contemporary media as resources for teaching.
- Provide free reading material on a wide range of topics.

#### Differentiating Process Based on Interest

- Use interest centers designed around topics within a unit that are of special interest to students.
- Use simulations that are relevant to the essential content and allow students to play roles and address problems or issues that are of particular interest to them.

#### Differentiating Product Based on Interest

- Enable students to use contemporary media as tools to demonstrate knowledge, understanding, and skills. (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, pp.134-135)

In addition, Sousa & Tomlinson (2011) provide differentiation with “synthesis groups and thinking caps”, strategies whose objective is “to focus students on meaning, understanding and problem solving” (pp.156 -157). Synthesis groups activities let students “focus on the big picture or major conceptual scheme that is emerging rather than on factual details and isolated data” (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, p.157). On the other hand, in thinking caps activities “students consider a problem or issue that is open ended” (p. 158).

As a result, when planning a lesson a teacher should have in mind all three aspects that make a successful lesson including readiness, interest and learning profile and insist on incorporating at least two of the elements if not all in a single lesson (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). Also, according to the aims of the lesson, the decision about the types of the activities used can be made, which should be various in order to meet the needs of the diversity existing in the classroom.

## 6. Conclusions and Suggestions

Since almost all classrooms consist of diverse students, it is a necessity for teachers to support that diversity in order for the learning to take place. The first step in helping those students learn is to educate teachers about differentiation as an approach which is “a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms” (Tomlinson, 2001 cited in Hall, Strangman & Meyer, 2003). Then awareness raising of the importance and key features of differentiation will hopefully result in its application in EFL and other classrooms with diverse students. If teachers are made conscious that students will not learn if the tasks used are either too difficult or too easy for them, they will try harder to create and adapt activities that will suit their level of language proficiency, as well as their preferences, needs and learning styles. The ‘teaching to the middle’ approach is no longer applicable in modern classrooms with a variety of students. Instead, designing a differentiated lesson plan will help reach every single student in the classroom. Focusing on the key features of differentiation, which are *content*, *process* and *product* will help teachers find ways to plan every stage of the lesson by having in mind what to learn, how to learn and the evaluation of what has been learned by using different levels of challenge for each category of students. Various differentiated tasks and activities, which are provided by many scholars also play a big role in the planning process of a differentiated lesson and in the teaching process itself when those tasks are applied according to the aims of the lesson, the students’ level of understanding and their interests.

Although research conducted on differentiation is ample, it is still not sufficient and is even considered an unknown field among local researchers and teachers, thus it is suggested that more focus is put on this approach. The urgency to get familiar with DI and apply it in the classroom becomes even more immediate because in many classrooms diversity is obvious, and because of the uncertainty of how to deal with it, it is neglected. Lack of knowledge about differentiation is not a justification for not applying it because students’ diverse needs are evident and they should be met, so there is not any other solution than to modify the curricula, adapt the textbooks, and create an environment which will maximize students’ academic success and prepare them for the future.

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