

Differentiated instruction in English Foreign Language learning in undergraduate studies

Laura Naka

University of Gjakova ‘Fehmi Agani’

Adress: Ismail Qemali nn 50000 Gjakova, Kosovo

Phone number: +381 38 20020831

E-mail: laura.naka@uni-gjk.org

Abstract

English foreign language classes consist of different English language learners' level proficiency. The importance of English language knowledge in Kosovo has influenced the efforts to increase English learning and teaching quality. One of the concerns that students consider for the effective EFL (English foreign language) learning is the lack of differentiated instruction implementation. Mixed ability classes are unavoidable phenomenon in educational environment, so individual preferences are varied and needed to be applied. The teachers challenge to meet their students' necessities should be counted as a goal to be reached. The study research aims to identify to what extent are differentiated instruction used in English foreign language classes in the Faculty of Philology and Faculty of Education at the University of Gjakova ‘Fehmi Agani’ in Gjakova/Kosovo, examine the factors that cause mixed ability classes and investigate the current situation of EFL learning based on individual needs, learning styles and importance of differentiated instruction as helpful tool to gain the effective learning environment.

Keywords: *EFL learning, differentiated instructions, mixed ability classes, individual preferences*

Introduction

The definition of DI is based on the different methods, different strategies and various activities that teacher implements to meet students' needs in the classroom. According to Tomlinson (2014), there is no single way to define a differentiated classroom. Differentiation is not really a method; it's a way of thinking about teaching and learning and there are many ways a teacher can do that (Blaz, 2006).

English as a foreign language in Kosovo has been increased last two decades. After the war in Kosovo, people found themselves ineffective in the absence of English language knowledge. They give great importance on learning English Foreign language because they believe it helps on going abroad whether for further studies or any global contact for professional or any business kind. To meet such necessities, they are focused on EFL learning from the early education. Even though, English was a subject learnt in previous education, primary and secondary level, they still come on undergraduate studies with different English language proficiency.

It has been done much research on differentiated instruction but little research is investigated among undergraduate students and the way they are exposed to differentiated instruction in EFL classes. Almost two decades ago, Carol Ann Tomlinson published her work ‘The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of all Learners’ in 1999. She expressed the inevitable need to differentiate instructions. Regardless of the learners' characteristics and the factors that influence their learning differentiation based on their styles and preferences, the teacher should find ways to fit everyone in the classroom. Therefore, the

teacher's right step is when he/she tries to challenge the students who are more advanced in English while the efforts to help those who do not have such skills are persistent. Advanced students might either a faster or slower pace, depending on whether they are working on something more familiar or want to go through a topic more in-depth (Tomlinson, 2014). Hereby, students knowingly or not, explore the way they will learn the lesson, and on the other hand the teacher observes on their learning styles to use them during the course. O'Meara (2010) suggests the model of the gradual release of responsibility, which offers a framework to support learners to become more independent.

Research questions

The questions addressed in this study are:

- How familiar are EFL learners with differentiated instructions in EFL learning process?
- Do EFL teachers encourage various students' learning styles?
- What challenges do English students face in mixed ability classes?
- How do differentiated instructions impact on students' language level improvement?
- Are students allowed to influence on EFL syllabus design and literature?

Objectives of the study

The research study aims to:

- Investigate and examine the challenges of differentiated instructions in EFL learning process among University students.
- Improve EFL learning in mixed ability classes through efficient methods of differentiated instructions in the Faculty of Philology and Education of University of Gjakova.
- Foster EFL learners to increase EL learning among students with different English language level proficiency.

Literature review

Generally, study needs to be followed by an appropriate climate so learners take its seriousness in consideration. At the same time the teacher should be careful in the progress of student's learning. Being transparent with students and enabling them to express freely to every question and request they will be able to fulfill their duties that were required by teacher. It is important for teachers to create a relaxed, positive atmosphere in the classroom (Ainslie, 1994). Hereby, they will have the chance to address the students' individual needs in order to make their learning process successful and meaningful to each student (Heacox, 2012; Subban, 2006; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson, 2005).

Prior to the implementation of any strategies, differentiating instruction starts as a simple mindset of a teacher, an understanding that each child brings their own memories and own previous experiences to class with them and that each one of them has their own areas of strength, areas that need to be strengthened, emotions, feelings and attitudes and most important of all, that each one of them can learn (Gregory, Chapman, 2013). The absence of the implementation of these strategies causes discouragement to students. The weaker students can fall too far behind to ever catch up and the stronger students can lose their motivation and interest in a subject in which they originally had a lot of potential (Caldwell, 2012).

The implementation of differentiated instructions in EFL learning gives a great importance on students' English language achievement. Now that the ministry of education obliges every child to attend regular school classes, even those with disabilities and special needs, the teaching methodology goes beyond the previous definitions and rules. Just as importance of quality in education and achievement in learning is given, the same importance is also given to inclusiveness. Since classrooms consist of different students regarding their social and cultural background, learning ability, previous teaching, student's personality and learning styles the different instructions are unavoidable to be applied in the classroom. Therefore, the impact of differentiated instruction in learning is of a great importance and it should be taken seriously. Differentiated instructions impact on getting to know the students, their individual preferences and readiness levels, on giving and testing homework, on student's assessment, affects motivation for learning, students' learning outcomes, etc. But in spite of many available strategies, Adami (2004) indicated that unfortunately many teachers still favor the whole-class teaching strategy rather than flexible grouping based on readiness, interests, or learning profile.

Problems and solutions of EFL learning based on differentiated instructions go beyond the strategies, methods and techniques of learning. The moment students begin to ask the teacher whatever questions about the lesson, individually, we consider that differentiated instructions are being implemented. The problem is how to reach every student and solve it through implementation of differentiated instructions. Tomlinson (2014) mentions that the key components that can be modified and thus differentiated are the content, the process and the product, sometimes also the learning environment (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 17-18).

Differentiating Content is what teaching material teacher teaches, how it can be modified and what does the teacher want students to learn.

- Differentiating Content for Student Need: Interest differentiation or Learning profile differentiation
- Strategies for Differentiating Content: Curriculum Compacting and Using Varied Text and Resource Materials

Differentiating Process are effective activities designed to help students progress from a current point of understanding to a more complex level of understanding.

- Strategies That Support Differentiated Processing

Differentiating Products represents assignments that are excellent ways of assessing student knowledge, understanding, and their skills in gaining language.

- Differentiating Product assignments for advanced learners and weaker students
- Support your students' use of varied modes of expression, materials, and technologies
- Remember that there are many ways people can express themselves
- Use product formats that allow students to express themselves in ways other than written language alone
- Give product assignments in smaller increments, allowing students to complete one portion of a product before introducing another.

Always, considering the possibility that not all students will be same graded and evaluated. These three elements are crucial part of forming many strategies for differentiated instruction and many subsequent works that focus on differentiated instruction are rooted in them (Corely, 2005; Gregory, Chapman, 2013).

Tomlinson (2014) also points out that in a differentiated classroom there should be clarity about the most important and essential things that students are expected to learn (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 14-17).

DI challenges in mixed ability classes are the most difficult challenge that EFL teachers consider to overcome. Mixed ability or ‘heterogeneous’ classes are misleading as no two learners are really alike and ‘homogeneous’ classes do not actually exist (Ur, 1991). Usually, students can be bored and lost in the group of students where everybody seeks to find him/herself adapted to the learning content and reach the maximum. Baker (2002) indicates that it is not just the fact that there are many students in a class, but that all of them are at so many different ability levels that provide the biggest challenge. All of them suffer the consequences of each other. Students have their own way of learning, and the weaker ones probably have more difficulties working in a noisy atmosphere since they are usually more easily distracted (Kelly, 1974). While advanced students concentrate on the given task and require immediate feedback from the teacher without having the patience to wait their classmates. Some teachers try to engage them with additional tasks, but, as Tomlinson (1997) emphasized, this could be seen as punitive for them. Bowman (1992) stated: “Students are very resourceful. They can create problems or generate solutions, depending on how you engage and maintain their attention”. Given this fact, it is important for teachers to create a relaxed, positive atmosphere in the classroom (Ainslie, 1994). The experience of each student and EFL teacher in the classroom is different as a result of everyone’s experiences, culture, expectations, strengths and needs.

Causes of EFL mixed ability classes have affected to the importance and implementation of differentiated instruction. EFL mixed ability classes are caused by several factors as follows.

Social and cultural background is a factor connected with the student’s school and family background, his/her position in society and family and relationship, parental education and the importance they give to their child’s education, gender influences, and the environment and conditions in which they live. **Learning ability** is another cause which has to do with the motivation to learn, talent and desire to gain knowledge, the ability to avoid gaps, disability to ask teacher’s help and to communicate with classmates, demoralization from unsuccessful success so far, etc. **Previous teaching** affects whether positively or negatively in students’ knowledge acquisition based on teacher’s professional development of EFL language who taught them during the previous education, teacher’s experience, teaching methodology, creativity and the way teacher manages the classroom. Each **student’s personality** is valued by taking into account their ambitions, problem solving skills, strength and weaknesses, his/her approach to studies, lack of confidence or overconfidence, sense of responsibilities, etc. **Learning styles** are the different learning ways that each individual chooses to achieve the goal. According to Keefe (1979): Learning styles are “characteristic cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment”. From these assumptions it is considered that factors which cause mixed ability English Language classes are numbered as a result of many differences in human genetics or the creation of human identity by the way of life.

Research methodology

Methods

The research used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. A quantitative method approach used

data from students' questionnaires while qualitative method came up with the descriptive analyses based on the findings from the focus groups discussions.

Participants

Sample of the study were 130 students of University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani", respectively 64 students of Faculty of Education and 66 of Faculty of Philology. The total sample of 160 students was enrolled in the third and fourth academic year of studying. They all learned English as a second language during primary and secondary education under the same curriculum.

Instruments

The research provided questionnaires for students and semi structured interview for focus groups in order to gain in depth investigation regarding the differentiated instruction issues. Furthermore, students who represented focus groups examined the new approach of methods and activities helpful for differentiated instructions implementation.

Data Gathering Procedure and analysis

Regarding the quantitative research, data were collected based on the responses of questionnaires that were provided by students of both Faculty of Philology and the Faculty of Education at the University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani". Additionally, regarding focus group discussion, analyses was exploratory and were analyzed according to EFL students' relevant concepts, opinions and learning activities, actions, processes and whatever is relevant to research investigation.

Findings

There were used questions based on research questions to reveal the findings.

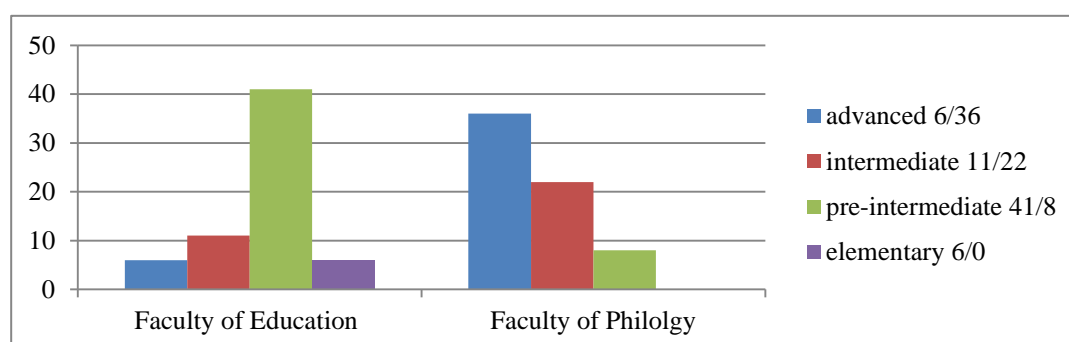


Figure 1. Students' English Foreign Language level proficiency

Based on Figure 1, students in Faculty of Philology have more advanced English language level proficiency than students in Faculty of Education. But, even though they know English better than students of Faculty of Education, they have the same attitude to the next question, as the following figure shows.

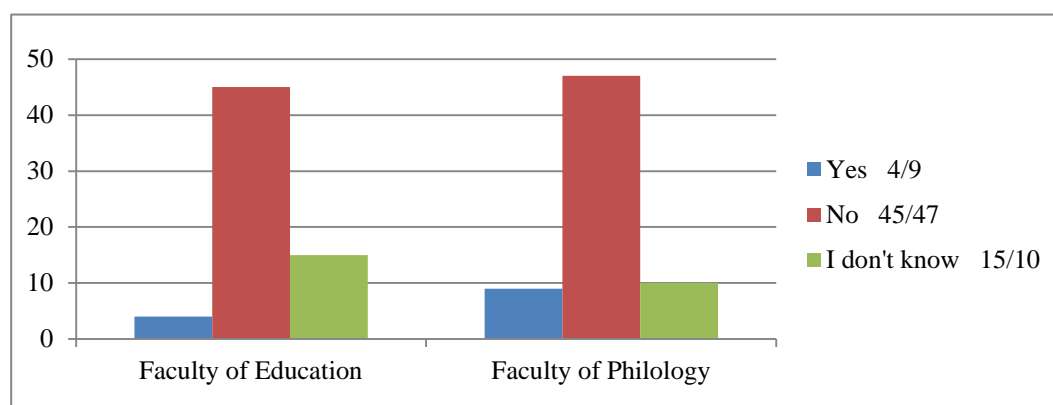


Figure 2. Does ‘One size Fits all’ teaching approach works in learning EFL?

Students believe that ‘one size fits all’ is not the helpful method that makes learners motivated to gain needed knowledge. 92 out of 130, or 70.7% of participants responded with no. Immediately, the demand for diverse activities and strategies in learning and teaching process comes to mind. According to Tomlinson (2001, pg.8) ‘one-size-fits-all instruction will inevitably sag or pinch – exactly as a single-size clothing would’. Gayle H. Gregory and Carolyn Chapman also explain the ‘one size doesn’t fit all’ concept (2013). They claim that differentiating instruction, prior to the implementation of any strategies, starts as a simple mindset of a teacher, an understanding that each child brings their own memories and own previous experiences to class with them and that each one of them has their own areas of strength, areas that need to be strengthened, emotions, feelings and attitudes and most important of all, that each one of them can learn (Gregory, Chapman, 2013).

Findings on How often does EFL teacher use differentiated instructions to suit the individual needs of each student, show this result?

	Faculty of Philology		Faculty of Education	
	No	%	No	%
Always	3	4.54	2	3.12
Often	6	9.09	9	14.0
Sometim es	19	28.7	24	37.5
Rarely	21	31.8	23	35.9
never	17	25.7	6	9.37
	66	100 %	64	100 %

Table 1. How often does EFL teacher use differentiated instructions to suit the individual needs of each student?

According to the data above, the students show that the teacher does not practice different methods by which the students would have the opportunity to find their way of learning. 87 participants or 66.9 % claimed that their EFL teacher used differentiated instructions in the classroom sometimes or rarely, and 35% said they have never applied while a very small percentage thinks the opposite.

Findings show that teachers give more importance to the implementation of syllabus rather than paying attention on students' needs. See table 2.

	Faculty of Philology		Faculty of Education	
	No	%	No	%
Strongly agree	39	59.0	42	65.6
Agree	7	10.6	10	15.6
Neither agree nor disagree	14	21.21	9	14.0
Disagree	3	4.54	2	3.12
Strongly disagree	3	4.54	1	1.56
	66	100 %	64	100 %

Table 2. Teachers give more importance to the implementation of syllabus rather than paying attention on students' needs.

This implies that the plan and design of the syllabus is made according to the way the teacher chooses, without considering the requirements of their students at all. It might be considered as the first step where differentiated instructions would take place to keep on going with other activities during the semester. These findings reinforce the view that EFL teachers do not cooperate with students at first, and their ability to collaborate on the literature that they will use is limited. This statement was clearly showed on students' response to the next question. See table 3.

Regardless of the students' learning styles and their English language skills, students do not approach the possibility of proposing material or literature that will be used throughout the course. The teacher decides on the relevant literature without being familiar with the language skills that the students have. As Table 3 shows, 97% of respondents in Philology and 86% in Faculty of Education say that they are not counted at all for collaboration of teaching and learning methodology.

	Faculty of Philology		Faculty of Education	
	No	%	No	%
Strongly agree	0	0	1	1.56
Agree	0	0	2	3.12
Neither agree nor disagree	2	3.03	6	9.37
Disagree	49	74.24	44	68.75
Strongly disagree	15	22.72	11	17.18
	66	100 %	64	100 %

Table 3. We are allowed to self-select a way to learn the material that is taught.

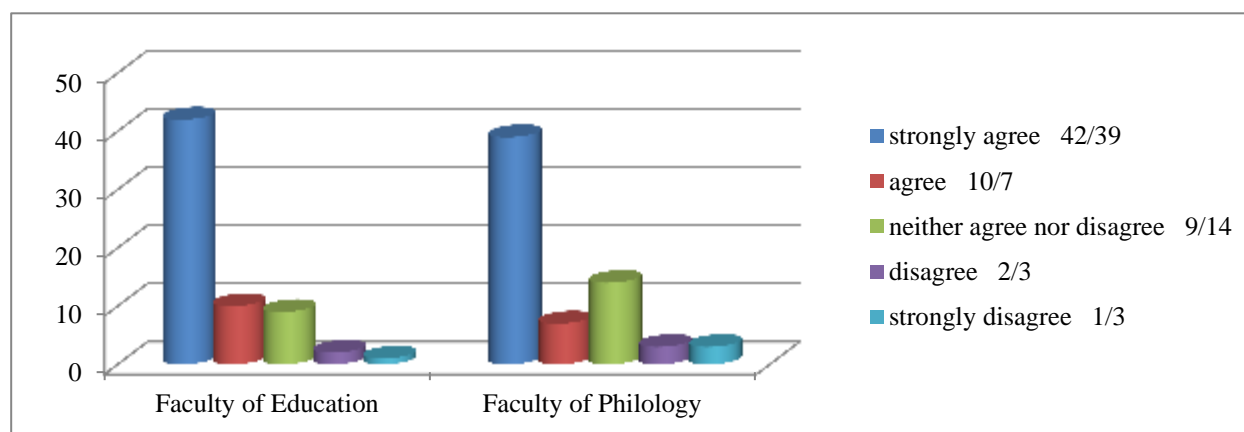


Figure 3. If EFL teacher uses different strategies it will improve the speed and quality of learning. Focus groups findings and discussion

Focus groups realized discussions and not just questionnaire closed responses, but that were pretty close thoughts. They had the opportunity to discuss the topic deeply and came up with different opinions and suggestions. They admit that it is difficult to manage differentiated classroom instruction, especially in EFL mixed classes, but still it is not impossible. Students are challenged in mixed ability classes regardless their language level proficiency. Some expressions emphasized by respondents are:

-In the classroom not all students are engaged same,

- Teacher doesn't consider our needs so she passes too fast,
- The teacher sets us the model of reflecting the lesson (I would like to answer the question based on the lesson),
- I'm shy; I can't speak in front of others,
- I'm challenged when I do not have the basic knowledge and the teacher goes on without stopping to clarify.
- I am challenged when the teacher doesn't notice if I need repetition, she just continue,
- The biggest challenge is when someone is active and all the time speaks without stopping, like all other students have to know English as he/she does.

With a greater responsibility and hard work, they believe that the teacher can meet the needs of each student. Teacher should provide additional tasks and activities for the students and would make sure each student gets the needed attention. Moreover, teachers should make the classroom comfortable place to approach lecture based on students' learning individual preferences.

Conclusion

According to the data research, mainly the respondents given thoughts, we may come to the conclusion that not much attention is devoted to the students when it comes to the quality of learning and the factors that contribute their learning. Unfortunately, differentiated instruction is not readily implemented in college, despite evidence supporting learning gains and other benefits in grades kindergarten – 12 (Chamberlin & Powers, 2010). According to students in University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani" in Gjakova/Kosovo, differentiation instruction is not often allowed by the EFL teacher since they give more importance to the designing syllabus prior than paying attention to the students' needs. English language teachers do not make the difference between the programs we study, the difference in the importance and the need for English language that the study program has or in the need to code switch in mother tongue when instructions are given. The environment is not to comfortable to control their own learning preferences. Students are confident that applied different strategies will have a positive impact on the improvement of English language learning.

Limitations

The study is limited only to two departments of the University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani" in Gjakova/Kosovo. Such a research would provide more accurate results than it did if it happened in many faculties of the Republic of Kosovo.

Recommendations

The study recommends wider research based on the number of participants and faculties. Moreover, it also recommends elaborating strategies and teaching-learning methods that would help implementing differentiated instructions in EFL courses in order to come up with the possible model helpful for English language teachers and learners.

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