

DIFFERENTIATION IN HETEROGENEOUS FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

Ieva Margevica-Grinberga
University of Latvia, Latvia

Andra Rektina
University of Latvia, Latvia

***Abstract.** The article covers the issue of how to teach foreign languages most effectively in heterogeneous classes. Such classes have occurred in most schools and classrooms in recent years. There is an exploration of the latest pedagogical literature and research of the developments and practices in differentiation for mixed classes reviewed in the article. In addition to the theoretical analysis of the literature, practical recommendations from meta-analysis studies and pedagogical specialists are provided. The practical suggestions cover the subsequent steps (e.g., pre-assessment of the students, diversity of the content in the classroom, different learning methods, differentiating of learning outcomes, etc.), that should be implemented in heterogeneous class groups in order to maximize the effectiveness of learning of a foreign language, but the practical approach will be reviewed more widely on the further articles. The article also covers research-based information about the barriers in foreign language teaching to find the solution to the addressed issues. As the respective barriers, the following are named – lack of specific teacher education regarding the mentioned matters and lack of implementing the particular methods in mixed ability groups.*

***Keywords:** differentiation, foreign language learning, heterogeneous foreign language classes.*

Introduction

Today, students in classrooms across the country continue to become more diversified and multiethnic. Similarly, teacher recognition has been drawn to different learners and inclusive educational practices. Differentiated instruction is an instructional framework that helps students to master outcomes in a variety of ways (Sun, 2021). Differentiated instruction, as opposed to whole-class or one-size-fits-all teaching, appreciates and values classroom differences to obtain educational objectives and personal growth through the use of multiple teaching programs and techniques tailored to students' requirements. Although previous studies have shown that differentiation has a beneficial impact, Kamarulzaman et al. (2017) believe that more research on the deployment of differentiated instruction or classroom management procedures, particularly in English language classrooms with gifted children, is required.

Methodology

The research aims to explore and determine the effectiveness of differentiation in heterogeneous foreign language classes by heterogeneity meaning different types of mixed abilities in one class. Specifically, it explores and answers the following questions: what steps should be implemented to heterogeneous class groups to make the learning of foreign languages more effective? What are the challenges connected to foreign language teaching, including mitigation measures? The research method involves a literature review where specific search terms like heterogeneity, mixed-ability classes, differentiation, and foreign language learning, will be used to explore databases like Google Scholar or EMBASE to search for peer-reviewed articles on the topic. This method is selected to help identify relevant studies on differentiation in mixed classes. It uses explicit approaches to recognize that which can be reliably said based on evidence (Torres-Carrión et al., 2018). The approaches are explicit and systematic to produce different and reliable outcomes. The selection of the article will be based on a given inclusion and exclusion criteria to enhance the reliability, relevance, and credibility of the research outcomes.

Literature Review

Despite making significant efforts suggested by published research, Suter (2021), Smale-Jacobse et al. (2019) in introducing methodologies and divulging the results on learners' achievement, differentiation persists among classroom teachers, perplexing instructors due to inappropriate deployment. Differentiated instruction, by description, is guidance intended to support individual learners' knowledge acquisition in a classroom setting with students from various backgrounds and with unique requirements (Tomlinson, 2001) or as highlighted by Baumgart (2009): "That students in one class do not do the same things with the same speed in the same way at the same time." OECD sees differentiation as "means building instruction from students' passions and capacities, helping students personalise their learning and assessments in ways that foster engagement and talents, and encouraging students to be ingenious" (OECD, 2018). As a result, the same overall principles governing differentiated instructional strategies for native speakers also apply to foreign language learners.

Five elements merit teachers' recognition and consideration when implementing differentiated instruction: material, methodology, product, impact, and educational environment. Three principles underlying these five dimensions are readiness, involvement, and learning profile. First, the educational content should be engaging and accommodate the various needs of students (Suprayogi et al., 2017). The appropriateness of educational content is determined by students' varying proficiency levels, student interests, and styles and strategies for

acquiring knowledge. Second, the process of learning, including skills and knowledge improvement, is linked to students' early educational styles, allowing for various instructional methods and speeds of knowledge acquisition (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Third, the product of studying, which is strongly connected to the assessment process, legitimizes the variety and options available in terms of educational outcome presentation methods. Fourth, interactions, cooperation, and communication between teachers and students are essential to meet the diverse emotive needs of students because these personal and social practices contribute to compassionate and dynamic connections and a supportive learning environment (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Finally, the cultural and psychosocial school environments should be inclusive and student-oriented to people with various personal interests and behavioral patterns. Effective implementation of differentiated instruction requires incorporating these five components supported by the three factors. This requires an integrated framework that considers inclusive rather than separate implementation and consideration.

Parallel to the increasing popularity of studies into the advantages of differentiated instruction; several inquiries have investigated the problems and obstacles of differentiated instruction implementation. A significant portion of the studies on this subject observes a misalignment between teachers' knowledge and understanding of differentiated instruction and their fundamental approaches to teaching. Manivannan (2020) published the results of a systematic review into twelve separate studies covering a vast geographical context. This study established that teachers still have a knowledge gap, whereas differentiated instruction had an almost negligible effect on student success. This knowledge gap is the reason for poor implementation and success rates for differentiated instruction. Contributing factors for the discrepancy range from a lack of relevant teacher preparation to inadequate pre-teacher training. A study by Brevik et al. (2018) featuring Norwegian high school students indicates a lack of teacher training targeted to implement differentiated instruction.

Developments in Differentiation for Mixed Classes

The development of differentiated instruction frameworks for Foreign Language Teaching in mixed ability classes has been documented for the more significant part of two decades. However, there has been much debate about establishing the correct foreign language learner substance, guidance, and evaluation (Spanou & Zafiri, 2019). As schools and teachers wrestled with this problem, it became clear that instructional equalization can only be accomplished if foreign language learners have access to the same academic subject matter as native language speakers. According to Pourdana and Shahpouri (2017), the most effective way to accomplish that objective would be through differentiated instruction that considers learners' English language proficiency and the

numerous other factors influencing learning. These factors include ability and learning disabilities.

According to Kotob and Ali Abadi (2019), academic outcomes show improvement after the instructional intervention was implemented in the experiment group; as anticipated, this effect is much more pronounced among low achievers than high achievers, as it guaranteed tremendous success growth in this group. After implementing the differentiated instructional methodology, low achievers' outcomes improved to a top standard, but differentiated instruction had less impact on top students because their success was already high (Siam & Al-Natour, 2016). This demonstrates that direct instruction works the best for low-achieving students because it allows them access to more focused attention. As a result, they improved or increased their academic success compared to their more advanced peers. This result underscores the efficiency of differentiated instruction methods in improving performance outcomes for learners, particularly among low-achievers (Siam & Al-Natour, 2016). As a result, the academic success of low achievers saw significant improvements among learners of the English language, ensuring a considerable change for the learners within a mixed ability class. Furthermore, differentiated instruction produces the best outcomes in a mixed ability class with various abilities (Smyth, 2018). As a result of the improved post-test scores, differentiated instruction proved successful.

As a way to get around their shortcomings, poorly prepared teachers in mixed-ability classes may tend to favor classroom instruction in rhythm with either the fastest or slowest learner (Tomlinson, 2017). This guarantees that whereas one of the sides in this divide enjoys being taught at a comfortable pace, the other has to deal with constant frustrations throughout the teaching-learning process. Given that one of the main duties of all teaching staff is to make sure that a significant proportion of their class masters the curriculum, classes should differ significantly: rather than trying to encourage the entire class to study and understand in the same fashion and to perform similar tasks, educators should give them the freedom to operate on different processes and projects (Spanou & Zafiri, 2019). One-size-fits-all guidelines risk leaving some of the class behind in the classroom context. When implemented in mixed-ability classrooms, these methods are also inefficient (De Neve & Devos, 2017). This results from underlying educational needs and learning impairments not being addressed.

Practices in Differentiation for Foreign Language Learning

Mixed ability or heterogeneous classrooms are composed of students with varying skill or learning proficiency levels. Such concepts are misleading because homogeneous classes cannot exist when no two learners are alike (Kotob & Ali Abadi, 2019). Consequently, learners in so-called heterogeneous classrooms may diverge in various ways. For example, they may respond differently to particular

methodologies of pedagogy and instructional techniques (Lunsford, 2017). They also have varying or present different opportunities and challenges. As a result, such considerations are only present in classrooms with diverse learners. There seem to be no classrooms with two learners who are identical in every way (Blaz, 2016).

Furthermore, mixed-ability classrooms are observed in every institution, where learners come from varying cultural backgrounds and have various background knowledge or competencies, confirming what was previously stated that students are not necessarily comparable according to Kotob and Ali Abadi in 2019. So, for individual students to learn and develop, teaching staff should facilitate them to work following their strengths by directing them in the proper direction. As a result, barriers to learning may be removed by directing and assisting them in developing their strengths.

According to Blaz (2016), the central objective for differentiated instruction classrooms is to provide equity in learning opportunities that create a difference for each learner. These opportunities are designed to account for differences in how students learn to provide equal access to the specific course material (Lunsford, 2017). Material may be adapted for learners who need more training with key aspects before progressing onwards; nevertheless, it is expected that changes in other factors will ultimately enable all learners to practice the same essential elements. It is critical to understand that differentiated instruction is an educational approach, not just a combination of strategies or tasks (Ginja & Chen, 2020). Effective differentiation necessitates the appropriate evaluation of students' requirements and careful consideration to designing an instructional strategy to achieve those goals. Teachers need to have a wide range of instructional strategies informed by inquiry at their disposal. However, they are required to come up with novel and innovative ideas to accommodate the specific requirements of each learner.

Barriers in Foreign Language Teaching in Differentiated Mixed-Ability Classes

Empirical studies show that differentiated instructions are not often offered in heterogeneous classes (Vock & Gronostaj, 2017). Also results of TALIS 2018 show that teachers who feel “well” or “very well” teaching in mixed ability settings are only close to 45% and there is a need to prepare teachers better for diversity and inclusion (OECD, 2020). The study reveals that teachers' beliefs of differentiation positively impact teachers' differentiating lessons (Warwas et al., 2011). Also, it is demonstrated in the study of Reuker and Künzell (2021) that diagnostic solid skills are as important prerequisites for differentiation.

One of the most significant barriers in differentiated instruction classrooms is a lack of depth of knowledge of multiple learning and instruction methods.

Despite their instruction and preparedness, teachers sometimes lack knowledge depth when it comes to methods of teaching and learning that apply to particular scenarios (Naka, 2017). Effective inclusion in the classroom depends on ensuring that teachers possess the right set of skills and knowledge to do so (UNSECO 2020). Taylors (2017) study revealed that teachers in differentiated instruction classrooms often lack the skill required to identify the learning needs of their students. This is coupled with an inability to modify the curriculum and instructional approaches to fit the specific learning needs of these students (Deunk et al., 2018). Additionally, a lack of knowledge of differentiated frameworks impedes the ability of these processes to succeed.

Also, teacher evaluation is crucial to promoting the quality of learning in the classroom. However, across countries, there are still equity and inclusion concerns in teacher evaluations that can disproportionately affect diverse teacher groups due to, among others, evaluation biases and mechanisms tied to student performance (Brussino, 2021). Evaluating teacher competencies and performance concerning inclusive teaching is key to promoting inclusive classroom environments for all. Teacher evaluations have two main components, improvement and accountability functions, aiming at improving teaching practices and making teachers accountable for their performance (Santiago & Benavides, 2009). As discussed above, there is a need for more solid teacher preparation for diversity and inclusion. Still, it is essential to underline that teachers often struggle or resist broadening their knowledge and changing their practices, especially in the area of diversity (Gay, 2013). Andreas Schleicher states that changing teachers' self-belief can represent the most critical leverage for change in education while often being one of the most challenging to achieve (Schleicher, 2020).

Literature also reveals that this lack of expertise affects the teachers' confidence when required to play a role in differentiated frameworks (Chien, 2015; Lunsford, 2017). As a result, their inspiration and self-assurance are impeded to the point where they oppose differentiation in their lessons for fear of losing control of the instructional setting. However, other studies negate this assertion and consider lack of knowledge insignificant. For example, Aldossari (2018), who conducted a study with similar objectives, observed that while educators in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stated that an insufficient knowledge on differentiated instruction was a concern, the report's statistics indicate that it was a minor issue when contrasted to other hurdles.

Due to complications, learners also present a significant barrier to differentiated instruction frameworks and implementation. Diverse classrooms offer a range of student challenges, including wide varieties of educational needs, lack of preparedness, and poor discipline (Aldossari, 2018). The success of differentiated instruction initiatives is heavily dependent on the intrinsic motivation and discipline of the students. This is precisely due to the importance

of group work and collaboration as a factor in differentiated instruction. Another key contributor to differentiated instruction success is student commitment to the process. According to Aldossari (2018), teachers encounter a significant challenge when learners are not aware of the significance and importance of differentiated instruction. The study also speculates that this comes about due to students being committed to traditional approaches and opposed to change. Attending to learners' needs in educational settings, on the other hand, boosts their self-assurance, which generates a zeal for learners to contribute or engage in the learning process.

More recent approaches to differentiation necessitate honoring critical teaching principles and a foundation of quality curriculum. An instructor should know what every learner needs to learn, understand, and be prepared to do at the end of the module when implementing specifications while developing and preparing instruction (Park & Datnow, 2017). The teacher is aware of learners' differences that impact their ability to understand the module and expands on these distinctions, improving the module's material, the diverse ways students handle the material, and the different products they generate to exemplify what they have understood. A pre-test or quiz, for instance, can be administered to assess existing knowledge of the material, student reflection can be analysed to determine obstacles and barriers, past exam results can also be used to evaluate improvement and preparedness levels, a multiple intelligences review can be used to assess different instructional profiles, or an inventory can be made to determine preferences (Tobin & Tippett, 2013). Differentiated instruction aims to improve students' learning by striking a balance between student-centered and instructor-led school systems, supplying opportunities for learners to work in various formats, working to develop instruction around the benchmarks and the "big picture" principle of the module, creating complex, demanding and considerate projects for all, and satisfying curriculum requirements and needs while optimizing student progress and individuality (Tobin & Tippett, 2013). Differentiation is supported by solid research. It places students' educational needs at the core of instructional strategies.

Recent studies by Naka (2018), Latkovska, and Zustrupa (2020) into the development, roll-out and results of differentiated instruction methodologies in heterogeneous classrooms have presented promising results. Most literature has established that the framework results in better achievements for low achievers and a moderate to negligible impact on high achievers. This observation is correlated to the fact that whereas high achievers can operate in less suitable environments, low achievers benefit more from targeted practices (Blaz, 2016). Foreign language learning, in particular, has benefited from the implementation of differentiated approaches, according to study observations from studies in these settings (Naka, 2017). However, the success of this implementation faces challenges from both teachers and students and established instructional practices.

According to Kotob and Ali Abadi (2019), no two learners are precisely similar, and this puts a strain on educators as they seek to create personalized educational strategies for learners.

Recommendations for implementing the Differentiated Instructions in the classroom

To give practical recommendations on how to implement the differentiated instructions in real classrooms, the following suggestions can be mentioned:

1. It is essential to determine the most appropriate level for the teaching of a foreign language.
2. The written and oral pre-assessment of the students shall take place to find out the learning style of the student.
3. Once the teacher has obtained complete information about the students in their class, the teacher's task is to offer all the students the content so that they can improve and learn according to the student's individual needs. Therefore, the teacher needs to know which are the most effective teaching methods that might deliver the best results in learning. Several focused studies measure the most effective teaching methods (e.g., Hattie, 2009), and it is worth taking a deeper look at these studies.
4. Bloom Taxonomy (1956) and Solo Taxonomy (Biggs & Kollins, 1982) allow the teacher to mark activities for students, ask questions, and search for answers considering the level of complexity; thus, providing students with broader and higher-level thinking challenges. The use of Bloom's and Solo taxonomies in preparing differentiated teaching materials is the key to success. A teacher can ensure the involvement and development of students of all abilities in the learning process.
5. Teachers shall pay attention to support through the learning environment.
6. Also, the monitoring of the student's results (e.g., summative and formative assessment) renders a significant impact on the results of the students (e.g., Hattie 2009).

Conclusions

The research confirms that differentiated instruction classrooms offer to learn equity and avenues that differentiate every learner. The learning avenues are structured to consider student learning variations, thus providing equal access to specific course material. Also, it is confirmed that differentiated instruction contributes to improved results in a mixed ability class with different capacities. Consequently, the enhanced post-test scores proved successful for differentiated

instruction. One of the main challenges experienced in implementing differentiated instruction classrooms is the lack of in-depth know-how of several methods of learning and teaching by teachers.

Therefore, further studies are needed to explore specific methods how to implement differentiated instruction in heterogeneous classrooms.

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