Differentiated Instruction: Challenges and Opportunities in EFL Classroom

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Abstract
The issue of Differentiated Instruction (DI) has recently attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners because of its immense significance and many opportunities to enhance student learning. In this regard, the current study aims to contribute a small summary of DI in the context of EFL to provide context and illustrate the need to implement DI in the classroom to ensure that students learn languages successfully. Since differentiated instruction puts students at the center of teaching and learning, encourages equality and academic achievement, and acknowledges student diversity, it encourages teachers to be aware of individual needs, interests, skills, English proficiency levels, and students' preferred learning strategies. Although some challenges may occur such as time-consuming and pressure on teachers in implementing DI, this approach has advantages that can affect students' learning processes, future learning attitudes, and future success. So, the learning process provides many opportunities when the teacher is committed to differentiated instruction.

Keywords: *Differentiated instruction (DI), EFL classroom, review*

1. Introduction

Nowadays in English language schools, students come from a variety of linguistic, educational, socioeconomic, and many ethnic groups. Because the classroom's heterogeneity is growing, language teachers may face difficulties because of this situation in effectively facilitating the language-learning experiences of various student communities. It represents the consequence of the one-size-fits-all strategy which may frequently employ in the preparation of textbooks, additional materials, and technology used which intend to serve a large market (Aldossari, 2018; Raza, 2020).

It might be difficult to learn English as a second language due to the dissimilar nature of the target language and the student's mother tongue (Maheswari et al., 2020; Manik & Suwastini, 2020). This problem is typically more severe when the individual qualities of each student are considered (Uzair-ul-Hassan et al., 2019). Therefore, the learning process must be more considerate of the individual qualities of each student. Such a learning process would position students at the center of the instructional process (Matra, 2014), with the teacher acting primarily as a facilitator who seeks out the most effective methods and strategies to aid students throughout their learning process (Bahous et al., 2011). As a result, Tomlinson (2001) popularized Differentiated Instruction, which is a teaching approach made up of purposeful awareness to meet students' variety (Joseph, 2013). Furthermore, DI is defined as a process visionary, student-oriented, qualitative, and based on an assessment approach. It also consists of teaching whole-class, large/small group, and individual instruction (Tomlinson, 2001).

In implementing DI, teachers must assess several aspects before executing the teaching and learning process. The aspects include students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Thus, teachers can effectively use DI throughout instruction, improving teaching, support, and learning for all students. By recognizing the distinctions among students, it is crucial to enhance both teaching and student learning. In the teaching-learning process, there can be many elements that affect how students grasp the key content, engage the classroom instruction, and demonstrate their abilities and expertise. Thus, instruction must address these disparities to help students succeed and fulfill their potential (Ortega et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 1999).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. It has been demonstrated to improve intellectual growth and interest in the subject, students' comprehension of the significant concept, and a method that could help all students learn and make greater progress (AlHashmi & Elyas, 2018; Kotob & Abadi, 2019; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020b; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019). Kotob and Abadi (2019) found the implementation of differentiated instruction, there was a significant rise in the academic performance of students who had previously been categorized as having low achievement. It has been demonstrated by Magableh and Abdullah (2020) that differentiated instruction is an effective instructional design for dealing with classes containing students with a variety of skill levels. Nevertheless, several researchers have raised concerns regarding the difficulty of successfully integrating differentiated instruction (Aftab, 2016; Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018; Naka, 2018a).

Considering the numerous demonstrated benefits of differentiated instruction, the present study will investigate the approach in greater depth to explain what differentiated instruction is, how to implement it, and what factors determine the success of its implementation, as well as to compare the strengths and weaknesses of implementing the approach in English as a Foreign Language classrooms.

2. Differentiated Instruction

2.1 Defining Differentiated Instruction

Tomlinson (2000) has pointed out the concept of differentiated instruction as a process in which teachers reorganize their classrooms to deliver the greatest education possible to every student. Students are engaged through a variety of teaching approaches adapted to their interests, needs, and abilities so that every student has a range of options to obtain and display their knowledge (Aldossari, 2018). Differentiated instructions are typically provided with a variety of variants to accommodate the varied qualities of individual students. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) called differentiation a sequence of educational strategies held as a way of thinking as well as a set of principles when planning and implementing a teaching and learning process, where ongoing representations on how to key result areas the learning content to students with various characteristics are conducted.

Tomlinson (2001) then distinguishes differentiated instruction from individualized instruction, which emerged in the 1970s she is defining what is the precise concept of differentiated instruction that

distinguish it from the misconception between them. He explains that the concept behind differentiated instruction differs significantly from Individualized Instruction. Different from individualized instruction, the goal of differentiated instruction is not to provide each student with a distinct level. But teachers may alternate between interacting with the entire class, several groups, and individually. Therefore, differentiated instruction does not make diverse groups unvaried, which is one of the reasons why flexible grouping is promoted in DI and dismisses the concept of fixed grouping (Baecher et al., 2012).

DI comprises three elements as its basis, namely content, procedure, and product. The content in DI takes the role of input or in other words, it is the knowledge that students are needed to obtain and to achieve the intended knowledge teachers need to employ the methods in instruction that are then called process (Tomlinson, 2001). To distinguish the material, teachers may employ extra texts, novels, or short tales at various reading levels (Algozzine & Anderson, 2007). Modify the process, it can be in a form of writing in a journal, designing models, and using choice boards (Tomlinson, 2001). Again, teachers can customize this component of their instruction by making contracts or entries of potential project ideas since the goal of the product should be for students to represent their topic mastery (Algozzine & Anderson, 2007; Sulistyo et al., 2018).

2.2 Adjusting Content, Process, and Product in the Differentiated Classroom

Pham (2011) pointed out that differentiated instruction involves adjusting both the content and the process. The modification can assist and enhance student development since it will be able to absorb and evaluate student performance more precisely if these areas are modified (Pham, 2011). According to Bigge and Shermis (2004), the targeted content must be both difficult and manageable for the learners, if it does not they will be demotivated and struggle. Hence, modifying the content is essential since it is adjusting the developmental progress and range of development of the learners. In addition, Pham (2011) emphasized that content modification should focus on essential instructional characteristics to achieve targeted learning results.

Differentiated instruction should be based on the specific qualities of the intended classroom's students. Any design of differentiated instruction must be based on a comprehensive understanding of student diversity. Consequently, the design of differentiated instruction always begins with a pre-assessment of student differences (Borja et al., 2015; Logan, 2011; Ortega et al., 2018). Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) categorize the distinctions between students as readiness, interest, and learning profile.

According to Tomlinson (2001), the learning process is when students grasp the knowledge or skills that are given to them. Thus process differentiation helps learners to generate similar outcomes or products in various manners (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). This implies here that teacher must then offer and combine the tasks learners use to learn and understand the material (Suharyadi & Wulyani, 2022). Also, the teacher may adapt the knowledge process for each student based on their level of readiness, their areas of interest, and their learning profiles. Good differentiation adapts or distributes the content concerning the student's preferred learning style, which may be visual, kinesthetic, or auditory (Fauziah & Cahyono, 2022). Students can participate in several activities that are meant to foster context by being encouraged to work in flexible groups that need numerous grouping patterns and enable them to collaborate individually, in partners, or as a team (Chamberlin & Powers, 2010). Several teachers also stated that flexible grouping might accommodate both students with similar learning styles and preferred learning methods as well as those with various styles of learning and learning preferences (Chamberlin & Powers, 2010).

Besides, the process is also considered the real key to teaching and learning, where the focus is on how students comprehend the material (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). This is the actual instruction of the created and planned-for material. This phase describes how the teacher would organize the class, considering the diversity and learning abilities of each student (Baumgartner et al., 2003; Borja et al., 2015; Ortega et al., 2018). Students can be conditioned to engage and collaborate to generate new content knowledge using strategies for flexible grouping (Winarti et al., 2021). To facilitate the students'

process, grouping students according to their readiness, interests, and learning profile can be quite advantageous at this point. Using graded activities that involve the same abilities, various learning activities can be provided to match the needs of each learner (Jin, 2015; Leblebĭcĭer, 2020; Valiandes, 2015). Students with an audiovisual learning style can use audiovisual learning media, while students with a visual learning style can use graphic organizers, concept maps, or charts, The assignment papers may be modified based on the needs of the students with varied time allotments and amounts of help (Ernest et al., 2011; Fuad et al., 2017; Malacapay, 2019; Shih, 2010).

Finally, besides adjusting content and process, Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) suggested that the product is as important as those aforementioned before. Since the product is the component of the curriculum that assesses whether students have mastered the learning subject and demonstrated the desired abilities (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). As a result of differentiated instruction, the way teachers assess the students is tailored to allow students to demonstrate their understanding and skills in a manner that corresponds with their preferences and characteristics (Aliakbari & Haghighi, 2014; Ortega et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2000). Assessment is possible by evaluating the goods created by individuals or small groups, by encouraging the person or group's products, or by providing rubrics based on differing skill levels that allow for variances of difficulty (Ernest et al., 2011; Subekti, 2020).

According to Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010), affect also incorporate as the final part of the curriculum that can be modified. It examines how the emotions and feelings from students' previous and present experiences influence their perceptions of the learning process and their positions as learners. Addressing the affective demands on students often happens when a teacher changes the classroom atmosphere compared to any other three classroom aspects that have been mentioned. A positive attitude toward the learning topic and the students as learners can enhance their academic development (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Students can be motivated to learn if they believe they need the content to prepare for their future careers. Similarly, students can get unmotivated if the study material reminds them of a negative experience. Recognizing the past experiences and future aspirations of the students might aid the instructor in tailoring instruction to accommodate the students' emotions and ambitions. The desire to go to English-speaking nations may drive students to study English. Choosing instructional materials that are relevant to these nations may increase their motivation. A variety of activities such as requesting directions and engaging in other everyday discussions in English-speaking nations will help students develop a positive attitude toward the learning process (Suwastini et al., 2021).

Furthermore, to prepare a classroom for differentiated instruction, it is necessary to modify seating arrangements so that students have access to a range of learning possibilities, including whole-class instruction, peer instruction, group discussions, teamwork, and independent study (Ortega et al., 2018). In fact, from the perspective of differentiated instruction, not every student works in the same setting, necessitating the application of a variety of instructional strategies to help learners acquire meaning from their newly acquired knowledge (Pham, 2011). A differentiated classroom environment encourages students to realize their potential and advance to the next level of their language proficiency while inspiring other students in the class to develop and be guided by the improvement and achievement of their more advanced classmates (Vargas Parra et al., 2017). According to Ernest et al. (2011), it is also possible to vary the learning environment by allowing students to complete assignments under their preferable conditions. Some students prefer a quiet spot to complete their homework, but others may perform better with music playing in the background.

3. The Critique of Differentiated Instruction

3.1 The Strengths of Differentiated Instruction

Numerous research projects have demonstrated the benefits of utilizing differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. For example, Kotob and Abadi (2019) discovered that low-achieving EFL students benefit from this differentiated instruction, such as the increase in test results, leading to an

improvement in students' achievements. Moreover, it is undeniable that the influence of grouping flexibility was an effective strategy for differentiating instruction and maximizing student performance, particularly for low achievers whose test scores climbed substantially. In other words, the successful technique of differentiated instruction ensures their academic development. An inclusive classroom setting produces a productive learning environment in which students felt comfortable and valued. The curriculum and teaching methods utilized by the English Language teacher contributed to the development and inclusion of students (Celik, 2019). Differentiation necessitates a significant shift in the current conception of inclusion in terms of students' engagement and dedication to the courses. It also motivates the teacher, who becomes more of a facilitator than a dictator (Celik, 2019).

Similarly, Sharaf (2019, as cited in Dabr, 2021) determined the usefulness of differentiated instruction for improving EFL writing skills. She gave the treatment in one group. The experimental group consisted of ninety sophomore EFL students. The study showed significant differences between the mean test scores before and after DI was implemented, it showed improvement in the post-test. Thus, differentiated instruction is excellent for enhancing the writing skills of EFL students. In a similar vein, DI also help students to increase their overall skills. Since, the students distinguished them according to their learning preferences (Dabr, 2021). Next, Magableh and Abdullah (2020a) investigated the influence of DI on EFL students' performance in reading comprehension. Their study involved two control groups and two experimental groups. The experimental group was taught with differentiated instruction whereas the control group was taught with the usual instruction. The results suggested that using differentiated instruction to improve EFL students' reading comprehension among Jordanian students in grades four and five was effective. Students that benefited from differentiated instruction developed reading comprehension, and this shows the improvement in student's performance in reading comprehension (Suson et al., 2020).

Further, the positive effect of DI also confirms by the project of Magableh and Abdullah (2020b) on studying the effects of DI on English achievement among students. This study involved sixty students from eighth grade who come from schools in Irbid and Jordan. The English language was taught to a group of thirty students using differentiated instruction and showed a favorable effect on reducing variation in the classroom and encouraging EFL learning and instruction.

Thus, after reviewing the ideas and implementation of differentiated instruction, it leads to the conclusion that using differentiated teaching to enhance the learning of students with varied backgrounds may be helpful. The implication in both theories and practices is that student's interests and needs may be met through differentiated instruction, so enabling them to learn English successfully. The accomplishment is a result of the teachers' thoughtful selection of differentiated instruction components to employ in the classroom. Consequently, most students who receive customized teaching are more confident and at ease when learning English based on their learning requirements and preferences (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019).

3.2 The Weaknesses of Differentiated Instruction

In the past years, teachers have typically encountered a variety of challenges in the classroom. Recognizing learner variability is one method for preventing low levels of student performance in the classroom. Teachers should adapt their expectations and the learning content and activities to the abilities and differences of their students (Celik, 2019). EFL teachers regard DI problems in mixed-ability classes to be the most challenging obstacle to overcome (Naka, 2018b). The greater the diversity of the classroom, the more preparation is required before instruction. Pre-assessment must be undertaken to determine the readiness, interest, and learning characteristics of each student (Suwastini et al., 2021).

The student-to-teacher ratios, inadequate pre-service training for teachers, a dearth of appropriate tools to implement differentiated instruction, a lack of student acquisition, and reliance on tried-and-true methods of instruction all ranked among the most significant obstacles (Aldossari, 2018). Teachers

would have been prevented from making the necessary changes to their classroom teaching due to practical issues (such as a lack of time or resources) or the additional preparatory time needed for its application (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Widiati et al., 2023). Limited time is a difficulty in DI, as a lack of deep learning cannot occur without it (Porta & Todd, 2022).

Therefore, most teachers do not agree that planning and instructional time are accessible for differentiation. When implementing and designing differentiated instruction, teachers encountered the most significant challenges and obstacles in the form of a lack of planning and instructional time (Aftab, 2016). They were unable to integrate differentiated topic instruction into their regular classroom procedures due to their lack of understanding, time constraints, and interactive lesson preparation (Chien, 2015). These teachers taught the identical content to the entire class. For differentiated instruction, they just used conventional texts; they did not use a range of resources (e.g., jigsaws, diverse organizers, and texts) since they were under time constraints to complete the textbook (Chien, 2015). This mismatch in teacher roles may have a theoretical justification. Teachers may acknowledge monitoring and facilitating students' learning but because of practical issues (such as pressure to finish the course material or time constraints they may regress towards the more comfortable procedure of continuing to act as a controller) (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019).

Teachers' ability to effectively embrace this instructional approach, however, is probably to be restricted by their inexperience with the DI's basic concepts. They may not experience its benefits therefore, which might cause them to develop a negative opinion of DI and revert to the traditional approach which they have familiar with (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019). Thus, these teachers must alter their instructional perspective to be more accepting of the variances in their classrooms. And when teachers are aware of these variances, they must be committed to making regular adjustments to their instruction to accommodate all students regardless of their differences. To ensure that all students have equal possibilities to master the learning content, regardless of their differences, teachers must continuously evaluate their students and reinvent their lessons. Therefore, a dedicated English instructor should have a variety of teaching styles to accommodate the variances among students (Afriliyasanti et al., 2016; Suwastini et al., 2021).

4. Conclusion

It has been argued that the principles of differentiated instruction offer EFL classrooms several benefits, particularly for mixed-ability classrooms, including fostering the students' performance, adjustment, enhanced self-awareness and responsibility, improved engagement, and students' motivation, as well as the development of student cooperation and collaboration. Differentiated instruction provides teachers with limitless options for the reflexive process and opens the door to the possibility of fair assessments. However, these advantages are not without disadvantages. Differentiated instruction requires commitment from both school administration and teachers. This approach to instruction is time-intensive and increases the teacher's workload. However, despite the difficulties, differentiated instruction does offer benefits that can affect the student's learning experience, their future attitude toward the learning process, and their future accomplishments. Thus, when teachers are devoted to the principles of varied instruction, the learning process offers several chances. It also asks for an unlimited amount of classroom action research in which teachers continually test out new ideas, methods, and media to improve students' overall performance. Considering these findings, to improve their ability to differentiate instruction and to use DI in language classrooms, teachers may find it helpful to take DI training workshops. It would also be helpful to provide teachers with training on the best way to utilize the differentiated resources currently included in coursebooks more effectively. Finally, assistance from school administrators (such as a customized website with differentiated resources) could perhaps ease teachers' concerns about the designing of instructional material.

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