

Differentiating Instruction for EFL Learners

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Abstract

This work aims at exploring what differentiated instruction is by providing an overview about how different authors conceive this new approach used in classroom instruction. It also provides an overview about how Vygotsky' Sociocultural Theory has influenced differentiated instruction, what can be differentiated in the teaching/learning process as well as what is necessary to consider in order to conduct instruction differentiation. Likewise, an overview about the demographics of one school setting in Ecuador along with an explanation of a set of ideas to differentiate the content, process, product, and learning environment within the English as a Foreign Language classes in Ecuadorian classrooms have also been developed as part of this paper.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, learning environment differentiation, speaking differentiation

1. Introduction

Twentieth first century education has not only evolved in terms of technology insertion in the classrooms around the globe, it has also brought significant changes in the students' population we find in these classrooms. Classrooms are not heterogeneously filled anymore. Consequently, today, it is normal to find students with different sociocultural backgrounds, different mother languages, learning disabilities as well as learning exceptionalities as part of the student population that makes up the class community. In addition, reflective attention to the individual characteristics of each student regarding learning styles, readiness level, interests, and learning profile has also considered these factors as components of the diversification of the classroom population we see today. As a result, the one-size-fits-all teaching instruction does not convey good teaching instruction practices in these types of settings. For this reason, there has been an increasing interest on searching for ways to differentiate the teaching-learning processes. By differentiating their instruction, teachers give themselves the opportunity to accommodate either the content, process, product, or learning environment within their instruction. By doing so, 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). Considering the importance of this teaching approach for successful teaching-learning practices, this research-based paper provides an overview about what differentiated instruction is, what can be differentiated during the teaching instruction as well as what it is necessary to consider in order to conduct instruction differentiation. Likewise, it also provides an overview about the demographics of one school setting in Ecuador. Finally, it will offer an explanation of a set of ideas to differentiate the content, process, product, and learning environment within the English as a Foreign Language classes in Ecuadorian classrooms.

2. Differentiated Instruction: An Overview

The evident diversification that educational institutions around the world have gone and continue going through since nearly thirty years ago until today is strongly due to the inclusion era present in the educational systems. This pattern involves the inclusion of students with learning disabilities, students from different sociocultural backgrounds as well as the growing number of students with high intelligence exceptionalities (Subban, 2006). In addition, the recognizance of other factors such as the students' learning styles, their types of intelligences, interests, and needs as well as their readiness to approach the content being studied in the class or to move on to the next one and the development of the human brain as indicators of diversity are also learners' characteristics that make up the diversity found within the classroom environment (Heacox, 2012). Consequently, this classroom heterogeneity has been the motor for teachers who are concerned about the challenges that this phenomenon represents to their professional practice to search for new teaching models for dealing with it (Subban, 2006). Furthermore, according to Stanford, Crowe, & Flice (2010), responsive teachers have already been using differentiation in their practice through a variety of forms for many years. However, not many teachers have been willing to develop professionally in this area, continuing this topic to be completely new to them (Subban, 2006). Since differentiation practice is accompanied with teachers' efforts to work in their classroom environment by considering new strategies and approaches to differentiate their instruction so that they can reach all the needs and interests of the students that are part of the diversified classes they teach (Subban, 2006), differentiated instruction is built up on theories that support the idea that every individual learns differently and at a different rhythm (Heacox, 2012; Subban, 2006). Accordingly, it has been agreed that teachers differentiate their instruction when they accommodate or adapt whether the content, process, products, or the learning environment in order to support their students' individual needs (Heacox, 2012; Tomlinson, 2001). According to Tomlinson (2005) as cited in Stanford, et al., (2010), "the depth or complexity of the knowledge-base a student will explore becomes the "content". The way in which a student gains access to knowledge is the "process," and the assessment of the students' knowledge of a subject is the "product" of learning" (p.3).

In addition, teachers who frame their classes grounded on the content, product, and process stages of the universal planning design framework, must first collect information about their students so that they can discover how diverse the population in their class is and start considering which types of teaching strategies, teaching methods, evaluation options, and materials they are going to use in order to develop their teaching plans applying differentiated instruction based on that teaching framework (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2007). As part of their plans, educators should develop differentiated activities that address the students' individual interests and encourage them to demonstrate their strengths (Heacox, 2012; Tomlinson, 2001; Subban, 2006). Thus, by differentiating their instruction, the teachers' goal is to provide students as much explanation about a topic as needed as well as as many activities that promote enough practice for all students achieve the objectives established to be reached in a lesson without leaving any learner behind (Heacox, 2012). Furthermore, Heacox (2012) stated that these activities should be challenging and meaningful for the students. Likewise, Heacox (2012) & Tomlinson (2001) claimed that differentiated activities should also show flexibility, variety, and complexity as students should be given the opportunity to choose on what to work and how to group in order to perform a task according to their interests but always promoting their cognitive skills potential to produce at a high level. Besides, they should serve as a mean for teachers to assess their students continuously while at the same time provide students an opportunity to show what they have learned.

3. Vygotsky' Sociocultural Theory Influence in Differentiated Instruction

In his sociocultural theory, Vygotsky assured that individuals learn by interacting with others; Their cognitive skills achieve higher levels of development as learners interact with skillful peers or adults who are well-grounded in a subject area (Gauvain & Cole, 1997). As part of his theory, Vygotsky stated that by receiving collaboration of more skilled people, individuals reach what he called the Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky referred to this zone as the space between the learners' ability to perform an assignment with peer or adult guidance and the capability the learners develop after that interaction and support for doing the same task by themselves (Walqui & Lier, 2010). Therefore, the interaction between the teacher and the students or peer interaction, a responsive instruction and content knowledge scaffolding are fundamental factors to consider in differentiated instruction (Subban, 2006).

4. What should Teachers Consider to Differentiate in their Classrooms

Knowing our students in depth is sometimes not reachable, however, educators should at least find a form to learn about their students “at a level that supports differentiated, personalized, or responsive teaching” (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p.58). According to Heacox (2012), there are several characteristics that make up the diversity of the population in a classroom. These characteristics may be the students’ interests, cognitive abilities, background, learning preferences, readiness, and needs.

All of them are important variables that can interfere with the learning process of students if they are not taken into account when receiving teaching instruction.

4.1. What to Differentiate?

Differentiation requires educators to conduct modifications in their elements that make up their lesson plans; these elements respond to the content, process, and product (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Heacox (2010) also identified the classroom environment as an element to consider in differentiated instruction. The content answers to the what of the teaching plan; what is expected from the students to achieve and demonstrate as a product of the learning process; the content is framed by the existing standards of the educational system (Thousand, et al., 2007). Teachers differentiate the content in their instruction when they pre-assess their students to get information about what they know in relation to the content that will be taught and group the students according to their knowledge level; Also, when teachers consider the students interests and provide them with materials to work on according to those interests and when their students’ potential is taken into account by having them to work with materials that would reinforce their level of knowledge (Heacox, 2010). The ways students prefer to learn – referring to the types of intelligences students have: linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, kinesthetic, musical, naturalistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal- are also important aspects to provide students with appropriate instruction when dealing with the form we approach content to them (Thousand, et al., 2007).

The process refers to the how in the teaching plans; it deals with the activities the students are to work on to understand the content they are learning (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). During the instruction process students are demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired by applying it on meaningful tasks (Thousand, et al., 2007). It is important to bear in mind that the activities performed by the students in this part of their instruction should be aligned to the lesson objectives so that they can demonstrate what they have truly grasped from the content. Heacox (2012) suggested that some forms of differentiating the process is by presenting different alternatives to the activities the students will work with; these alternatives should be directed to students learning styles such as having them to draw, prepare role play, oral presentations, etc., according to their learning preferences. Finally, the product also refers to how, but in this case to how the students demonstrate the acquired knowledge through assessment after certain period of time (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Thousand, et al., (2007) stated that by differentiating their instruction, teachers give students the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a variety of forms and continuously as the resulting information provides a base for the elaboration of lesson plans for future lessons. The utilization of authentic assessments is an assest to measure the students knowledge everyday (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). To add, Heacox (2012) claimed that it is the teachers’ role to provide students with a variety of authentic project-based tasks choices to demonstrate and evaluate their knowledge, always targeting to have them show what they have learned by working on tasks that would support their areas of strength or learning preferences.

5. Previous Studies that Support the Use of Differentiated Instruction in the Classrooms

There have been many studies conducted about the use of differentiated instruction in the classroom setting. Simpkins, Mastropieri, & Scruggs (2009) conducted a study in a mid-Atlantic suburban school. In their study, they had the participation of three female teachers and sixty-one fifth-grade students. The students were approximately eleven years old and the group of students participants was composed by general education students, students at risk and students with learning disabilities. During the study the students received two periods of five week science classes in which they were taught under experimental and control conditions. During the control condition instruction, the students received lecture directed classes where the use of traditional practices such as readings, worksheet completion was the mean of teaching/learning. On the other hand, on the experiment-based classes, differentiation that reflected the enhancement in the curriculum was applied. During this instruction time, students received peer tutoring when developing tasks (Simpkins, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009).

The results of the study conducted by Simpkins, et al., (2009) showed that the students' scores of tests were higher when they received differentiated instruction intervention than when they received regular controlled classes. Teachers also said to be satisfied with the results obtained when applied differentiated strategies with their students. Likewise, Mastroperi, et al., (2006) conducted another study about the effects of differentiated curriculum enhancement in the classroom and high stake tests. In their study, they had the participation of 213 eight-grade, science students. Forty-four of those students had learning disabilities. Students were assigned to control and experimental groups and received instruction under those conditions for a period of twelve weeks.

Just as in the study stated above, control groups received traditional instruction. On the other hand, experimental groups worked on cooperative hands-on activities where lower level students received peer support. The material used for students was differentiated by levels (three levels) that represented the content to study, the production expected with prompts to develop the tasks and production without guidance. With those differentiated materials by levels, students could work on the level they were at and practice on the other levels if they needed additional practice. The results of this study showed that students who received differentiated instruction improved their scores on high stake tests in science when their instruction was differentiated by levels and using hands-on activities with peer support than when they received traditional instruction. Their level of satisfaction towards working with differentiated activities and managing materials during the performance of the hands-on activities was reported to be high on this type of instruction as well.

6. Demographics

6.1. School Overview

One of the authors would work in a public coeducational high school in Ecuador. The educational establishment where she worked is a medium sized public high school located in an urban area of a coastal city which is situated in the south part of Ecuador. This high school is surrounded by neighborhoods which are inhabited by low economic status people. Both basic superior and baccalaureate school levels are provided in this establishment. The school has two study schedules. In the morning for the baccalaureate levels and in the afternoon for the basic superior grades. For the baccalaureate, the establishment offers three technical specialties: Informational Technology, Accountancy, and Mechanical and Metallic Constructions. In the high school there are approximately eight hundred and fifty students and forty-five teachers. Students are placed in groups of thirty-five to forty-five students per classroom. Four of the school teachers belong to the English area. All the students receive five hours of English per week. Since a curriculum transition for the English subject is currently being experienced all over the country, in the past years, the English teachers and students started working with a new book which promotes the application of the communicative approach. According to the author's experience, in this educational institution, teachers do not differentiate their instruction to address the students' individual needs. Neither in their day to day instructional practice nor in the application of formative or summative assessments. Teachers still apply the one-size-fits-all teaching approach. Consequently, when they face cases of students with learning disabilities, they do not know how to deal with those situations. In the high school there are sixteen classrooms. All the classrooms are equipped with individual school benches for students and a small table for teachers. There are not English laboratories in the school. Teachers are only provided with a whiteboard as a resource for teaching in every classroom.

6.2. Student Population

The majority of the students who attend this educational institution come from the surrounding neighborhoods. All of them are Spanish speakers. There are not immigrant students in the school. The student population of this school is made up of mestizos and a low percentage of afro-Ecuadorian students. As the school is a coeducational institution, both male and female students are part of the student population of every classroom except for the classrooms of the specialty in Mechanical and Metallic Constructions in which all the students are males. According to the author's direct observation, until now, in the school there has been only one case of a special needs student and four more with notable intellectual disabilities which means that the number of students with this type of difficulties is pretty low. However, every class has a high percentage of students who have other types of issues such as reading or writing limitations. Also, due to the social background the students have, the majority of them manage a limited amount of sophisticated or academic vocabulary which in many cases, interferes with the comprehension of their instruction or the quality of work they produce. In every class, we find students who have problems at home. Many of them see violence in their houses. They have been children raised by single mothers, stepmothers, or by any other relative such as their grandmothers or aunts.

Some of these students have to work to support their home. Other students live alone or are married adolescents. There are teen single mother or pregnant cases as well. Cases in which students have drinking or drugs problems are also experienced in the classrooms. All of these are characteristics of the students that make up the classrooms of the school where one of the author's worked. However, it is important to mention that this is the reality that numerous teachers face in their work setting not only in Ecuador but in a numberless of institutions around the globe.

7. Applying DI in the ESL Classroom

The English Language Learning Standards in Ecuador are aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. According to these standards, students should have acquired A1, A2, and B1 English levels by the end of the 9th year of General Basic Education, 1st year of Baccalaureate, and 3rd year of Baccalaureate respectively. These standards aim at the learners' development of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as the base for communicative purposes (Ministerio de Educacion, 2012). For this paper, we have chosen to investigate about the factors and strategies to consider in order to differentiate speaking for the students who are studying in the 1st year of Baccalaureate. The differentiation of speaking for this target group will be grounded on what is expected in the Level A2 for the Speaking and Production skill of the English Language Learning Standard. The standard for the speaking skill (Speaking Production and Interaction) in the Level A2 as established by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education in the curriculum for the English subject indicates that at this level students should:

“[u]se a series of phrases and sentences linked onto a list to communicate in simple, routine tasks within the personal, educational, public, and vocational domains. [...] Handle very short social exchanges within the personal, educational, public, and vocational domains even though they can usually understand enough to keep the conversation going themselves.” (p. 10). By following these standards, English learners in the 1st year of Baccalaureate are to gain the necessary skills to produce spoken language that will allow them to communicate in different contexts and situations. These situations can go from simple exchanges of personal or routines information to more complex ones such as the exchange of information related to public, vocational, and educational matters wherever the topics emerge.

8. Ways to Differentiate Instruction

Considering the knowledge of the students' cognitive abilities, learning profile, socioeconomic and family factors, readiness, learning pace, gender influences, cultural/ethnic influences, teachers can differentiate either the content- what will be taught, the process- how the content will be taught, or product- how the students will demonstrate their learning. Accordingly, they can differentiate just one or more of those components of their instruction (Heacox, 2012). In addition to these areas, Tomlinson (2005) also considered the learning environment, which involves the routines, procedures, physical arrangement of the classroom, as well as the overall tone or mood that exists among the students and between the students and teacher, as an important factor to differentiate within the teaching instruction.

8.1. Content Differentiation

As stated by Heacox (2012), the content refers to the topics and concepts students are to learn. Content differentiation can be developed by looking at the students' readiness through pre-assessment, by providing students' choices to explore topics more deeply, and by providing students with resources and materials that are in accordance with their' knowledge level. Another way of differentiating the content could be by creating study units. As pointed out by Walqui & Lier (2010), teachers usually create study units that aim at accomplishing standards goals as well as to target the needs of specific students. Considering the several ways to differentiate content specified above, in order to differentiate the content for Ecuadorian students' development of speaking skills in English, first, teachers should pre-assess their students' spoken production so that they can know their fluency and accuracy level as well as their lexical knowledge regarding daily and academic vocabulary. In order to do that, by the beginning of the school year, EFL teachers can have their students work in pairs so that they can produce spoken language by interacting around topics that would model different scenarios such as the exchange of information within the personal, educational, public, and vocational domains. Teachers should use checklists as an assessment tool to find out about their students' English spoken skills level. Checklist should be provided to their students while they are working in pairs so that they can evaluate each other.

Likewise, they should also use checklists to assess their students' work and confirm the information provided by them in their peer assessment checklists. Once the students' speaking production level has been determined, spoken production models should be provided according to the students' fluency levels. Students with low speaking level skills shall be provided with simple and short speaking conversational models whereas students with more advanced fluency will be provided with longer speaking models. Those models will include more complex structures and vocabulary aimed at their level accordingly. Similarly, spoken models for production in certain topics will be determined by the students' lexical knowledge. For instance, students who struggle to transmit information about personal situations should be provided with spoken models to manage that area. Once they have mastered that domain, they should be provided with more advanced materials to scaffold their knowledge to other domains such as educational or public topics. On the other hand, students who already have a good command in communication about personal matters should be given the choice to explore the use of the spoken language (vocabulary, phrases, structures, etc.) that is being taught in other domains or situations.

8.2. Process Differentiation

The way we teach the content to the students refers to the process. When differentiating the process teachers should take into consideration the students learning profiles and preferences (Heacox, 2012). In addition, Tomlinson (2005) in Santangelo & Tomlinson (2012) stated that the "Process can be thought of as the "sense-making" activities that allow students to begin thinking about, working with, and personalizing the content—either in class or at home" (313). The same authors mentioned that different forms of grouping are also necessary to differentiate the process. For instance, students may be grouped according to their readiness level, interests, profiles, by their own choice, or heterogeneously. Likewise, Walqui & Lier (2010) noted that within a lesson, teachers should consider three moments and different strategies to approach those lesson moments. Those moments refer to the students preparation to approach the content, the students' interaction with the text and the students' application or extension of the knowledge acquired within the lesson. Bearing in mind the information previously stated, EFL instructors shall use different grouping configurations to have their students work in their speaking production. They should be asked to work individually, in pairs, and small groups according to their level of readiness, interests, or heterogeneously. Some of the activities teachers should use are having my students work within their grouping configurations in spoken activities such as illustration of procedures, verbal explanations (of a poster, photo, chart, graph, etc.), discussions, reading-speaking responses, interviews, classes presentations, debates, speaking models, investigations, dialogues or songs creations analysis, etc. Students should be allowed to use pictures, word cards, graphic organizers, music, etc., to support their spoken practice. All the activities should be grounded on the utilization of the same vocabulary, expressions, structures, but considering the students' speaking level, they should be conducted in different spoken situations or at different difficulties levels.

8.3. Product Differentiation

The product of the students' learning involves the presentation of what the students have learned after certain amount of instruction (Heacox, 2012). Tomlinson (2005) in Santangelo & Tomlinson (2012) referred to the product as a mean to assess the students summatively. Likewise, the same authors stated that products should "facilitate students' ability to critically think about, apply, and demonstrate what they have learned [...] provid[e] meaningful opportunities for cooperative learning; focusing on real-world relevance and application; promoting creative, critical, and higher level thinking; [...]; allowing choices, such as varied modes of expression; offering appropriate scaffolding and support; and utilizing peer and self-evaluation" (p.313-314). In order to differentiate the product within their class, they should have their students demonstrate their spoken skills through a menu of different activities which should be based on what they have learned within a content unit. Students should have the choice to present their learning results individually, pairs, or in small groups regarding their interests and speaking levels. The menu of activities can include the performance of role plays, sketches, conducting debates or discussions, interviews or dialogue modelling, using songs to demonstrate their learning, explanation of situations based on visual representations, story-telling accompanied by pictures, etc.

8.4. Learning Environment

Differentiation of the learning environment promotes the respect to the individuals, the materials, space, and time. It also promotes the students support, cooperation, and collaboration among one another. The availability of resources for class work considering the different factors that make each student different is another factor to consider within the differentiation of the environment.

When differentiating the learning environment teachers and students share their responsibility for teaching and learning and teachers provide individual attention to the students as they need it (Tomlinson (2005) in Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012). Taking into consideration the factors that promote a differentiated learning environment previously stated, EFL teachers may differentiate their classroom environment by encouraging my students to create an environment of respect among one another. They should have them work within different grouping configurations so that they can support each other to scaffold their learning. Another point EFL teachers should consider is the elaboration or search of materials that will allow them to provide them with content materials that go according to their readiness level or interests. Also, they should monitor their students while they are working so that they can provide them individual or group support when needed as well as more time to develop their tasks if necessary. Similarly, they should give their students the opportunity to become responsible for their own learning as they will be able to decide the types of materials they will use for their own learning as well as the tasks they will perform to demonstrate their progress. Finally, teachers should manage to elaborate or get visual (pictures, posters, videos, etc.) and audio (audiotapes, music, etc.) representations of the content being studied in order to support the student learning and provide an interactive environment.

9. Conclusion

Differentiating the teaching-learning instruction has indeed become a huge option to enhance students' progress. Knowing the students in depth can play an important role to achieve the learning goals in a class. In fact, by knowing their students, teachers can find a starting point to accommodate their content, process, product, and learning environment within their curriculum plans. This will help teachers to explore new strategies to differentiate their instruction in order to address the students' the individual needs, interests, learning styles, learning profile while promoting meaningful learning for the students. The need to differentiate the teaching-learning instruction within EFL classes is not far from the reality of any other content area classes. For this reason, exploring different strategies to differentiate the content, process, product, and learning environment may allow English as a Foreign Language teachers differentiate their instruction in order to support their students to reach the communicative competence and language skills that learning a foreign language demands. Not leaving any student behind by applying differentiated instruction to address students' individual needs is an outstanding teaching approach, but how could the application of differentiated instruction provide effective alternatives for EFL teachers to help their students gain the same English language level at the end of a study term in order to perform well in standardized tests?

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