

Differentiation of Instruction in the English Language Classroom Using Bloom's Taxonomy

Nikolaos Pozoukidis

Education Quality Supervisor Secondary Education Directorate of Kozani, Greece

Abstract: The conventional educational model perceives the learning process as a straightforward transmission of knowledge from teacher to learner. This perspective assumes that all students receive identical educational opportunities, as the instructor typically employs a uniform approach, predominantly utilizing teacher-centered strategies, without consideration for the individual backgrounds of the students. However, there is a growing recognition that each learner possesses unique needs and preferences shaped by various biological and environmental influences. Differentiated instruction seeks to embrace classroom diversity not as a challenge but as an inherent aspect that must be addressed through the lens of social equity. This paper provides a succinct overview of the fundamental characteristics of differentiated instruction, advocating for its implementation within the context of English language education.

Keywords: differentiation of instruction, English language teaching,

I. Introduction

It is frequently asserted that conventional educational institutions are free from discrimination and provide equitable learning opportunities for all students. However, the reality is that these institutions tend to offer uniform opportunities to students of the same age, operating under a behaviorist framework that perceives learning as a straightforward transmission of knowledge from teacher to learner. This viewpoint implies that the learning experience is identical for all individuals and is not influenced or enhanced by external factors.

In reality, the dynamics of cognitive development among students are far more complex than a linear progression based solely on age, as suggested by Piaget. Students do not arrive at school as a singular, cohesive group; rather, they come with diverse backgrounds shaped by various social, economic, educational, and cultural influences (Gurian, Henley, & Trueman, 2001; Santamaria, 2009; Tomlinson, 2001). Additionally, the presence of students with varying degrees of learning challenges further complicates this landscape. Consequently, it is imperative to view students as unique individuals, each carrying their own personal histories that influence their readiness to learn. In the context of Greece, the common practice of enrolling children in language schools at an early age introduces another layer of complexity, contributing to disparities within the English classroom. Nevertheless, by considering Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the "Zone of Proximal Development," which outlines the boundaries of each student's learning potential, it becomes evident that educational practices must be tailored to accommodate the unique capabilities of every learner.

It is evident that the conventional educational model, characterized by a standardized approach to instruction and reliance on a singular textbook, does not provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, ultimately catering primarily to the so-called 'average student.' However, it is important to recognize that the concept of the "average student" is not a tangible individual but rather a theoretical abstraction derived from statistical analyses of student performance across the entire population. Consequently, for educational institutions to effectively serve their purpose within a democratic society, namely, to deliver high-quality education across all subjects,

they must ensure that each student receives tailored learning opportunities that align with their unique needs and preferences. Implementing differentiated instruction can serve as an effective strategy in achieving this goal.

II. Differentiation of Instruction

Differentiation of instruction, as articulated by Tomlinson (2000), involves customizing educational experiences to address the unique needs of each learner. This perspective indicates a shift in focus from product to process of learning (Bergström, online). Yi (2009) stresses that differentiated instruction is rooted in the principle of social justice within the educational context, aiming to provide equitable learning opportunities that are free from exclusion and discrimination. Unlike conventional teaching methods that emphasize student similarities, differentiated instruction prioritizes the distinct needs, abilities, and interests of students. Consequently, this approach underscores the importance of the learning process over the final outcomes, distinguishing it from traditional pedagogical practices. Furthermore, Sfyroera (2004) highlights that the implementation of differentiated instruction challenges the simplistic attribution of variations in student performance solely to intelligence or innate learning capabilities.

Differentiated instruction is closely aligned with the principles of social constructivism, as articulated by Vygotsky (1978). This theoretical framework posits that learning is inherently a social endeavor, wherein individuals assimilate social knowledge through interactions with more knowledgeable peers (Bruner, 1978). Each learner engages with this knowledge in a personalized manner, operating within their unique zone of proximal development. Consequently, individuals are able to accomplish tasks that would be unattainable in isolation. In this paradigm, the teacher's role is to create tailored learning opportunities that facilitate knowledge acquisition for each student. According to Tomlinson and Kalbfleisch (1998), if instructional materials do not meet the student's level of understanding, learning is unlikely to occur. Conversely, overly challenging materials can lead to frustration and disengagement. Tomlinson (2004) asserts that optimal learning occurs when students are presented with tasks that are appropriately challenging, neither too easy nor excessively difficult. In the context of foreign language instruction, Krashen (1987) similarly emphasizes the importance of introducing learners to concepts that are just beyond their current understanding, a principle he refers to as $n+1$, where n represents the learner's existing knowledge. In English language classrooms, it is common to observe significant variability in learning readiness among students. Additionally, the presence of students enrolled in multiple English classes concurrently exacerbates this issue, resulting in classrooms with diverse competency levels. A viable approach to address these challenges is the implementation of differentiated instruction.

Differentiated instruction, as articulated by Tomlinson (1999, 2004), is grounded in several key principles: (a) prioritizing the learning process around fundamental concepts and skills instead of isolated facts, (b) ensuring that all students are engaged in significant and relevant tasks, (c) acknowledging and valuing the diversity of students while "deeply respecting the individual identity of each student" (Tomlinson, 1999: 24), (d) employing assessments that aim to facilitate growth and improvement rather than merely documenting mistakes and deficiencies, (e) fostering collaboration between teachers and students within student-centered frameworks, (f) encouraging both collaborative and independent work in a flexible manner, (g) connecting differentiation to various aspects such as content, process, outcomes, or the learning environment, and (h) tailoring instruction to align with students' readiness, interests, and specific needs.

III. Elements of Differentiation

Tomlinson (2000) identifies four key components of differentiation: content, process, product, and the learning environment. A concise overview of these elements is provided below.

3.1 Differentiation of content

Tomlinson (2000) characterizes content as the essential knowledge that learners must acquire or the means through which they will access this information. It is imperative that the objectives of a lesson align with the established curriculum. However, those with practical experience in foreign language instruction recognize that

students may vary significantly in their familiarity with the material being presented; some may be entirely new to the concepts, others may possess a limited understanding, while some may already have prior knowledge before the lesson commences. Weselby (2014) posits that teachers can address these disparities by differentiating content through the design of activities tailored to various student groups, aligned with the six major levels of Bloom's taxonomy. This taxonomy progresses from lower-order thinking skills to higher-order thinking skills, encompassing memory, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation, and creation. Shabatura (2022) emphasizes that Bloom's taxonomy serves as an effective framework for formulating learning outcomes. In the context of an English language classroom, where lessons typically initiate with a written or spoken text (language input), differentiation can be implemented. Students with limited fluency might be engaged in tasks that correspond to the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy, such as *remember* and *understand*. Suitable activities for these learners could include gap-filling exercises, summarizing content they have read or heard, or rearranging sentences to create a coherent summary. Conversely, more proficient students, who demonstrate a greater understanding, could be tasked with *applying* and *analyzing* the text's content through more creative and open-ended assignments, such as completing a similar text with a provided introduction. Ultimately, students exhibiting the highest levels of fluency could focus on the *evaluation* and *creation* levels. To illustrate the rationale behind a lesson plan, one might outline a progression of activities from the least to the most challenging.

Pre-reading/ listening activities

- Brainstorming centered around a specific term derived from the text
- Students make predictions regarding the content of the text, informed by its title.

While-reading activities

- Students engage with the text and respond to questions that vary in difficulty levels.
- They associate words with their corresponding definitions
- They differentiate between factual statements and subjective opinions presented.

Post-reading activities

- Students complete a crossword puzzle, each of whom may receive individualized assistance
- They engage in solving a crossword puzzle, with each individual potentially receiving varied assistance.
- They reflect on an event involving a character and devise an alternative conclusion to the narrative.
- They develop a presentation that encapsulates the key points of the lesson.

3.2 Differentiation of the process

The differentiation of the educational process pertains to the manner in which students assimilate new information within the classroom environment. It is well-established that each learner possesses a unique learning style (Gardner, 1983), and effective differentiation must acknowledge this diversity. Consequently, it is essential to present information in various formats, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities. This approach emphasizes the learning process rather than the final product and recognizes that individual students require distinct forms of support from teachers (Bruner, 1978). Furthermore, while some students thrive in collaborative settings, such as pairs or small groups, others may prefer solitary work. By considering these factors, teachers can better address the specific needs and preferences of each student. Examples of differentiated processes may include the following:

- Teachers ensure that the instructional materials encompass not only written content but also visual and auditory elements, a capability made feasible by advancements in multimedia technology.

- They promote the engagement of all learners by providing assignments tailored to their individual learning preferences. For instance, kinesthetic learners are afforded the chance to engage in interactive online activities.
- They adjust the duration allocated for students to complete various tasks.

3.3. Differentiation of the product

According to Weselby (2014), a product is characterized as the outcome produced by the learner at the conclusion of a lesson, serving as an indicator of their proficiency in the newly acquired knowledge. While this product may traditionally manifest as a test, it can also encompass a project or various other activities. The specific form of the product may vary based on individual student preferences and learning styles, potentially including a range of options such as the following:

- Students with a preference for writing and reading engage in composing a written text.
- Visual learners develop a graphic organizer to represent the narrative.
- Auditory learners articulate their understanding through narration.
- Kinesthetic learners construct a diorama or enact a brief theatrical performance.

The interplay of the aforementioned elements can lead to a multifaceted collaborative endeavor, wherein each participant contributes based on their individual strengths. Numerous studies underscore the advantages of collaborative learning (see, for example, Herrity 2024, Kakana, 2004). Specifically, in the context of written language production, such collaboration enhances both the quantity and the quality of the resulting discourse (Kakana, 2004).

3.4 Differentiation of the learning environment

The term "learning environment" refers to the operational dynamics of the classroom. Weselby (2014) identifies that optimal learning conditions necessitate both physical and psychological factors. A classroom designed with movable desks facilitates both individual and collaborative activities. In educational institutions where a dedicated classroom exists, transforming it into an English classroom is crucial, as this allows for a more stable layout and the pre-installation of necessary equipment. Various adaptations of the learning environment can be implemented based on specific needs, such as:

Organizing desks to facilitate group work among students is essential, while also providing the option for those who prefer to work independently.

The learning environment is designed to minimize distractions by limiting the presence of visual stimuli, such as excessive decorations or objects, which can be particularly challenging for students with learning difficulties.

Additionally, we encourage mobility among students during their work periods, allowing them to move as needed.

To promote inclusivity, we provide resources that represent the diverse cultures and preferences of students, particularly in smaller primary school settings.

Furthermore, we ensure that students are well-informed about the established procedures for seeking assistance from the teacher, thereby reinforcing classroom routines.

IV. Conclusion

The necessity of differentiated instruction should be a primary focus for educational institutions to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students. In the context of the English classroom, differentiation is particularly essential due to the challenges posed by mixed-ability groups, a common concern among teachers.

Acknowledging this reality, it would be disingenuous to assert that such differentiation does not impose additional demands on teachers' daily responsibilities. Implementing differentiated strategies necessitates extensive planning and supplementary efforts to identify and prioritize various activities tailored to students' diverse needs. Furthermore, it requires a level of expertise that develops overtime. However, the benefits of differentiation are substantial. It enhances the learning experience for all students and provides teachers with the gratifying knowledge that their instruction has effectively reached their students, a situation that is not always prevalent in English classrooms for various reasons. Additionally, when more students become able to meet the lesson's expectations, it diminishes behavioral issues and fosters a more positive rapport between teachers and students.

References

- [1] Bergström, P. (online). Shifting the Emphasis from Teaching to Learning: Process-Based Assessment in Nurse Education. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ963926.pdf>
- [2] Bruner, J. (1978). 'The role of dialogue in language acquisition'. in Sinclair, A., Jarvella, R., and Levelt, W. H. M. (eds) *The Child's Conception of Language*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- [3] Donato, R. (1996). 'Collective scaffolding in second language learning'. in Lantolf, J. P. and Appel, G. (eds). *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research*. Norwood, N. J.: Ablex Publishing Company.
- [4] Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books
- [5] Gurian, M., Henley, P., & Trueman, T. (2001). *Boys and girls learn differently: A guide for teachers and parents*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- [6] Herrety, J. (2024). 11 Benefits of Collaborative Learning (Plus Tips To Use It). <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/benefits-of-collaborative-learning>
- [7] Kakana, D. M. (2008). *Group Collaborative Teaching and Learning: Theoretical Approaches and Educational Perspectives*. Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Brothers
- [8] Krashen, S. (1987). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. London: Prentice Hall
- [9] Shabatura, J. (2022). Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Write Effective Learning Outcomes. In *Assignments & Measuring Student Learning*. <https://tips.uark.edu/using-blooms-taxonomy/#gsc.tab=0>
- [10] Sahlberg, P. (n.d). Principles of Co-operative Learning. Διαθέσιμο στο http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:C2PNHH8e37gJ:tedp.meb.gov.tr/doc/Pubs/14C/TA/Curric_TLM_AL_attach_3.doc+&cd=3&hl=el&ct=clnk&gl=gr&client=firefox-a [προσπελάστηκε 10/05/2013].
- [11] Santamaria, L. (2009). Culturally Responsive Differentiated Instruction: Narrowing Gaps Between Best Pedagogical Practices Benefiting All Learners. *Teachers College Record*, 111(1), 214–247. <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/what-differentiated-instruction> [accessed 13/1/2025]
- [12] Sfyroera, M. (2004). "Differentiated Pedagogy", Keys and Passkeys, Ministry of Education, University of Athens, Education of Muslims 2002-2004.
- [13] Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. Alexandria, USA: ASCD.
- [14] Tomlinson, C. A. (2000). Differentiation of Instruction in the Elementary Grades. ERIC Digest. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.
- [15] Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). Grading for success. *Educational Leadership*, 58(6), 12-15.
- [16] Tomlinson, C. (2014). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. Alexandria, U.S.A.: ASCD.
- [17] Tomlinson, C. A. (2004). Research evidence for differentiation. *School Administrator*, 61(7), 30.
- [18] Tomlinson, C. A., & Kalbfleisch, M. L. (1998). Teach me, teach my brain: A call for differentiated classrooms. *Educational Leadership*, 56(3), 52-55.
- [19] Vygotsky, (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- [20] Weselby, C. (2014). What is Differentiated Instruction? Examples of How to Differentiate Instruction in the Classroom In <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/classroom-resources/examples-of-differentiated-instruction/>[accessed 15/11/2018]
- [21] Yi, Z. (2009). Mechanism and Strategy for Differentiated Instruction Promoting Fairness in Education. *Journal of Shijiazhuang Institute of Railway Technology*.<https://consensus.app/papers/mechanism-and-strategy-for-differentiated-instruction-yi/2adaf2b72d405d159c5de801fc16b471/>