



Implementing Differentiated Instruction in the Classroom

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Abstract

As the student population in many English Language classrooms in the U.S. becomes more diverse, educators seek ways to address their many, varying language learning needs. One way to provide optimum language learning opportunities for students with a variety of language learning needs is for teachers to differentiate instruction. Differentiating the content, the process, and the product allows teachers to meet the specific and varying needs of the language learning students in their classrooms. This student centered approach puts the students' language learning needs directly in the center by taking into account student readiness for learning, student interests, and student learning styles. This article will discuss how teachers can begin to use differentiated instruction in the language learning classroom

Introduction

The scenario is familiar to every English language teacher. After the teacher introduces the day's topic, teaches the language lesson, and demonstrates with a few examples, several students still approach the assignment with hesitation, a multitude of questions, and missing some language needed to accomplish the assignment successfully. Even in classrooms to which students are assigned after careful testing, the mixture of reading, writing, speaking, and understanding abilities in the new language can vary greatly. The teacher offers extra help and encouragement and even then the students flounder and lose

motivation. Most teachers recognize that more individualization would be helpful, but the prospect is simply too unrealistic and overwhelming to undertake on a daily basis. It is here that a teacher's ability to differentiate instruction can be a helpful solution to providing quality instruction at all levels without causing undue and unrealistic pressure on the teacher. Differentiated instruction means adapting instruction to meet individual needs. In differentiated teaching, the teacher makes deliberate plans and uses flexible grouping strategies within one of three broad areas of lesson planning: the content, the teaching process or the final product, to make the class more accessible for the student (Tomlinson, 2014).

Background

Differentiated instruction was first used in the general classroom mainly to enhance the education of the gifted and talented student who needed an additional challenge (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003). Tomlinson (2014) suggests that differentiated instruction is not really a novelty as it is similar to the kind of instruction that occurred in the one-room classrooms in which all of the students of all ages received instruction together, or were divided into small groups, or taught individually while other students worked independently. Having experienced a one-room schoolhouse classroom myself growing up in Canada, it is easy for me to imagine the type of differentiation that is being discussed. More than anything it involved a carefully orchestrated plan on the part of the teacher, who sequenced through her teaching plan with a rhythm that grew out of rigorous pre-planning and strong expectations for students to work individually and collaboratively. While one-room schoolhouses are less than ideal for today's educational demands, the idea that students can be grouped according to learning needs and can work together collaboratively for optimal learning is still a good one and forms the basis for some of the ideas behind differentiated instruction. In the 70's, the terms "mainstreaming" and "inclusion" became common as the desire to include all students in the learning process, and

collaboration and grouping according to learning needs became common. So while it wasn't until more recently that the term "differentiated instruction" has become common, the philosophy and educational theories that support it are not new (Pavelock & Harlin, 2013).

What is differentiated teaching?

Differentiated instruction is a teacher's response to learners' individual needs and is implemented through flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, and respectful tasks which are all part of the planning process (Tomlinson, 2014). Differentiated instruction is based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted to individual students in the classroom (Tomlinson, 2014). In other words, differentiated instruction allows teachers to approach their lesson planning not with the content as the primary focus, but with the needs of their students as their focus (Tomlinson, 2014). This subtle shift in focus is a very important component of differentiated instruction. Making the student the center of the teaching reconfigures how teachers need to think about the planning for the teaching of their content, their processes, and the products that demonstrate learning.

However, differentiated teaching is not individualized instruction (Tomlinson, 2014). In differentiated teaching, the teacher does not try to individualize everything for every student every day. Individualized instruction is not sustainable because the teacher cannot maintain the effort for a classroom of students every day in every class. Differentiated instruction is an overall approach to teaching which focuses on planning for learning beginning with the needs of the student, the readiness of the student, and the interests of the student and then adapting the lesson plan to encompass those needs into the framework of the class. It is student-centered teaching.

Lessons can be differentiated in three general ways: the content, the process, or the product (Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiating content includes what the student should know, understand and be able to do after the lesson. It also includes

developing meaningful objectives which in turn is made easier by knowing the students (Pavelock & Harlin, 2013). Content is perhaps the most difficult area in which to differentiate teaching simply because students need to learn the material or skill being taught. Reading material with simplified language or materials using video or audio recordings to convey key concepts are examples of ways to access similar content using a variety of techniques.

The second area in which a lesson can be differentiated is in the process used by the learner to make sense of the skill or content. The teacher might think of it as the activity or the process the students use to learn the content (Tomlinson, 2001). A useful way to change the difficulty of a task is to tier the demands of the activity in such a way that all students no matter what their language level will be able to perform their assigned task. One of its benefits is that all of the students in the class are working on the same material, and so oral feedback can go to the whole class. Another advantage is that the activity can be designed so students can choose their own level of support (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

The third area that a lesson might be differentiated in is the final product which demonstrates learning and can be used for assessment. When the teacher sets the goals for the lesson, the next step is to determine how the learning goals will be assessed. Again, teachers can make choices as to what differing ways the goals of the class can be met.

Procedures

How can differentiation best be implemented? The first step and the key to differentiation is knowing the individual needs of each student (Pavelock & Harlin, 2013; Tomlinson, 2014). Teachers need to know the current knowledge level of their students in order to be able to predict what their needs are going to be and how much accommodation they will need. I often use the results of standardized testing, such as the CASAS test if they are available to give me to give me a starting idea of the students' abilities. I also listen closely to

students' responses both orally and in written work to confirm their linguistic strengths and learning needs. Initial interviews with adult students often help me understand their motivations, areas of interest, and challenges. Closely related to an assessment of the students' language knowledge and ability is knowing the students' readiness for language learning, their interests, and their learning styles. Initially this may seem daunting, but it can be done by checking student records, by using both formal and informal assessments in the first few days of class, and by holding group discussions and encouraging students to share their learning needs and interests. Obviously, ongoing relationships with the students and formal and informal assessment will provide further evidence as the learning continues. While this may sound like a lot of work for teachers, and there is no denying that it is, this initial investment in students will make all the difference in the success of the teaching and how well students flourish in the classroom. Gathering information about students' needs and interests is an ongoing process, and influences decisions as to how to group students for ideal learning. Using this information, teachers can then begin to plan differentiation in their classes by using a framework that focuses on three general areas: the content, the process or the product (Tomlinson, 2001).

Decisions about which of these general areas should be differentiated are determined by the objectives of the lesson. For example, a lesson focused on comprehension of a concept would lend itself to differentiation of content simply because the focus of the lesson is learning the content and that is what the students need to understand. On the other hand, a lesson in which the learning objective is focused more on process such as learning to use a variety of vocabulary words correctly, students could practice the words using a variety of different processes such as word/definition matching exercises, writing the words using playdough after the definition has been read orally, or drawing examples of the word meanings. Visual learners, aural learners and tactile learners would benefit from a variety of activities that would suit their learning styles

and the end goal still would be attained. Finally, a lesson in which the final product is differentiated would be one in which students would be able to choose from a variety of end products which would all show mastery of the material taught but perhaps would demonstrate that mastery in a variety of ways. For example, if the goal is mastery of content, then students could write reports, present reports orally or demonstrate content mastery in a visual manner. Determining the best way to differentiate is always based on the objective of the lesson and accomplishing that objective for all of the students.

Once the decision has been made where it is appropriate to differentiate the lesson, how does it work? Differentiating the content is challenging, yet there are ways to do so successfully. For example, in a lesson that differentiates content, students may be given different reading levels of the same material. The teacher may work with one group to explain vocabulary before the students tackle the content, whereas another group may not receive this instruction but may be required to spend some time explaining the vocabulary after they have read the content. A variety of computer programs are available which allow teachers to upload content and vocabulary explanations are provided just by highlighting the appropriate words. Closely related to differentiating the content is differentiating the process which allows for a lot of flexibility for the students. Perhaps all students begin by reading the same story or paragraph. Weaker students are given a list of statements which are correct but are not in right order. They need to choose the correct order for the statements. Midlevel students might do a multiple choice test on the reading. Advanced students would be given open-ended questions to answer.

Another example might be that the weaker students would get a word bank to help them find the correct word to a list of questions, whereas the stronger students would not receive the word bank.

The third area in which to differentiate learning is in the product that demonstrates learning (Tomlinson, 2001). When setting the learning goals for the lesson, the teacher also needs to determine how learning will be assessed. Again, options can be given so that the

students may choose individual reporting or team reporting. A variety of resources and modes can be used to prepare the final product taking into account the learning styles of students. These resources could include video, audio, or realia based products. Students can be given choices as to how to express what they have learned, but the final determination of how learning is demonstrated is determined by the teacher based on the needs of the students.

An integral part of the differentiation process is the use of flexible grouping of students so that students are sometimes working with students of higher or lower ability and sometimes in homogeneous ability groups, or according to their learning needs and interests. Students could sometimes be allowed to group themselves and sometimes the groups are predetermined based on criteria that the teacher has planned to create the best learning environment.

Students should learn to be flexible and collaborative learning should be encouraged. How much support students receive from other students, individuals, or the teacher is part of teacher planning. Building in time for small group instruction and reading circles provides opportunities for individualized help within a small group. Depending on the situation or student, the teacher can also allow the use of a variety of responses, both individual and group. The beauty of this is that differentiation allows the teacher to meet the needs of the individual students in the class in an achievable manner.

Assessment

While proponents of differentiation often write about improvements in their classrooms, there seems to be very little evidence to date that the full use of differentiation in English language classrooms has been researched extensively (Hall, Strangman, Meyer, 2003). Perhaps this is because teachers often implement differentiated instruction in only some areas of their teaching. Hall, Strangman, and Meyer (2003) do note that there has been significant classroom research supporting the concept of zone of proximal development, a foundational idea in differentiated instruction. In fact, “researchers

found that in classrooms where individuals were performing at a level of about 80% accuracy, students learned more and felt better about themselves, and the subject area under study” (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003, p. 5).

A review of the current literature on differentiation in the classroom does indicate that “the best teaching practices are those that consider all learners in a classroom setting and pay close attention to differences inherent to academic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity” (Santamaria, 2009, p. 241). While the literature is generally very positive about differentiation, and it seems obvious that teachers would want to take advantage of the variety of gifts, talents, and backgrounds that language learners bring to the classroom, deliberate planning for how to make the most of the language learning opportunities in the classroom is ultimately up to individual teachers and their own desire and expertise in designing differentiated learning opportunities for their students.

Evaluation, limitations, and implications for future

English language teachers must recognize that differentiated instruction is a student-centered approach to English language teaching and as such it colors all the choices that are made in the language classrooms. It helps teachers do what they want to do most: serve their students. However, as with any other philosophical approach, it must be implemented with care and thought. Since it can seem overwhelming, the process should begin slowly by embedding some differentiation into some of the classes some of the time.

The focus on learning and meeting learning goals may need to be explained to students as they experience the dynamics of a differentiated classroom. Some students may feel the need to accomplish the same assignments as others simply because the focus has always been on completion rather than learning. Once students understand this, they become motivated to learn and increase their abilities.

Conclusion

As a teacher, the thought of individualizing my classroom to meet the diverse learning needs and styles of my students seemed overwhelming at first. However, once I recognized differentiated teaching as an approach to the learning needs in the classroom, it provided me with a very helpful framework for the planning that is required to provide the very best instruction for my students. Thinking in terms of differentiating the content, the process, and the product and using flexible grouping allowed me as a teacher to build successful lessons on a framework designed to meet the specific and varying needs of the language learning students in my classrooms. Differentiated instruction gives the teacher a way to deliberately plan for instruction which benefits all the students in the classroom.

Author Note

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