



Differentiated Instruction as the Main Tool in EFL Learning Enhancement

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Abstract

Considering that the area of education during the last few decades is making efforts to increase the quality of education, the great importance is being given to teaching and learning methods to be implemented in the classroom. This study focuses specifically on teaching and learning methods in the EFL classes. The teacher's challenge is teaching in EFL mixed ability classes and the best way to overcome the situation is considered differentiated instruction application. Therefore, the aim of the study tends to investigate on differentiated instruction which is being counted as very effective in increasing EFL learning. The study has conducted the investigation in University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani" in Kosovo – Faculty of Philology through the descriptive method by observation in EFL classes and focus group discussion with students at this faculty. The aim of the study is to raise teachers' awareness for continues implementation of differentiated instruction so that no student is left behind. We are all aware that 'one size does not fit all', thus this teaching approach would be the best tool for reaching our goal in teaching professionally. The study also examined the teachers' and students' perception on differentiated instruction and its impact on English language learning improvement. Moreover, the study found out the present situation of how much these teaching methods are implemented in this educational environment and how satisfied are the students with the teaching of English language teachers.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction; EFL learning; Teaching methodology; learning styles.

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1. Introduction

Since English as a foreign language began to play an important role in Kosovo, especially after the war in 1999, high instances of education, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in the Republic of Kosovo including teachers and other actors of education are making a maximum effort on improving the quality of teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. Many trainings and exchanges of English language teachers were organized with a view to their growth and professional development in order to reflect positively on the English language learning. But, the biggest challenge that needs to overcome seems to be the endeavor to meet the needs of each learner in the EFL (English Foreign Language) classroom. Obviously, it requires hard work, taking into account difficulties that teachers have given the differences among the students in a class. Until recently it was considered that differences among students are based on their limited abilities or their special needs. But, this surpasses the idea of differentiation. Students differ in their readiness to learn, the interest they have in the course they learn and their individual learning preferences known as learning styles. Obviously, this differentiation between learners is caused as a result of various factors, as social, economic or psychological factors are. They come to the classroom from different families with different traditions and customs, come from a different social relationship, from another place, from other learning environment they have experienced so far or from an area where education is evaluated differently. Therefore, the main role in adapting their needs has the teacher and his/her teaching methodology that he/she implements. The best possible way has proved to be application of differentiated instruction in EFL classes.

1.1. Differentiated instruction in EFL classroom

According to previous research and also the present study, differentiated instruction is a set of teaching methods that are used depending on students' needs in the classroom. Differentiation is a variety of classroom practices that accommodate differences in student's learning styles, interests, prior knowledge, socialization needs, and comfort zone [1]. In differentiated instruction, teachers design activities that support students' learning preferences and strengths while presenting tasks that encourage growth in areas of weakness. The more ways the teacher can engage students in learning-giving them more opportunities to use their preferred ways of thinking-the better their ability to learn [2]. Teacher being prepared now must be ready for these new changes, and possess the awareness, skills, and dispositions appropriate to teach diverse students of this new century successfully [3]. Thus, it needs great teacher's effort and also being professionally developed.

1.2. Why to differentiate

As noted above, not all learners show the same readiness to learn. Some have poor English language skills and lack motivation to overcome this situation while others do not fit the way the teacher teaches a lecture. Sometimes the topic being taught based on the curriculum of the teacher does not wake the student's interest sufficiently. So if we want to get away from traditional teaching it's good to be flexible with the teaching material in order to fit the interest of students. And, what's more important is the students' learning styles. Not all learners have the same style of learning, therefore one size doesn't fit all learners and every teacher's obligation is to leave no student behind in the classroom. According to [4]:

- Differentiating process according to student *readiness* means matching the complexity of a task to a student's current level of understanding and skill.
- Differentiating process according to student *interest* involves giving students choices about facets of a topic in which to specialize or helping them link a personal interest to a sense-making goal.
- Differentiating process according to student learning profile generally means encouraging students to make sense of an idea in a preferred way of learning [4].

Given the availability of strategies such as differentiated instruction, responsible pedagogy no longer allows us to teach as if students all learned in one way, and at the same pace. If we are to maximize achievement of general curriculum standards, we must increase our efforts to differentiate instruction [5].

1.3. What to differentiate

Even though English foreign language teachers consider mixed ability classes to be challenging to achieve the plan and to achieve their goal of successful teaching again the chances of reflection are to be hoped. The best way to achieve that goal is the teacher's effort to understand who his/her students are, what preferences do they have, what are their opinions about teaching and why not even creating an atmosphere so students may influence in changing the teaching methodology that would help them in better learning.

Differentiating content is selected and provided material that teacher wants her/his students to learn. If students do not understand the language level the material serves they will have less motivation in learning. As [6] states: content is what we teach and each child is taught the same curriculum but the content may be quantitatively or qualitatively different. Moreover, according to [6], differentiated instruction allows for variation in content without losing sight of the curriculum to which all children are entitled.

The process differentiation is the process of teaching and learning based on the activities for gaining the content defined for a particular learning unit. In the language of school, process is often spoken of as an activity. Furthermore, [7] describe it as an activity of how the learner comes to make sense of, understand, and own the key facts, concepts, generalizations and skills of the subject.

Differentiating Products represents assignments that are excellent ways of assessing student knowledge, understanding, and their skills in gaining language. When it comes to product, as [4] emphasizes: The assignment should make clear to students what knowledge, understanding, and skills they must include in their work; the stages, processes, and work habits they should demonstrate as they work; the option(s) for expressing their learning; and what quality will look like.

2. Methodology

The study developed the following research questions:

- How does implementation of DI by the teacher impact in EFL learning improvement?
- What challenges do English language learners face in mixed ability classes?
- Does differentiated instruction help your EFL learning?

The study used descriptive method based on the investigation through classroom observations and focus groups with students. For this research, there were conducted four observations in EFL classes in University of Gjakova “Fehmi Agani” - Faculty of Philology. After the observation, the author proposed focus group discussions, only on a voluntary basis, regarding to the will of the students. As the topic that the author of the study introduced to students was found with interest by them and they were curious to debate about this topic, the students expressed their readiness for the discussion in the focus groups. The author of the study observed four lectures in the different courses. There were observed the lectures of English for specific purpose, syntax, interpretation of the literary work and the theory and practice of translation. Out of four classes observed, a number of 25 students were declared volunteer to participate in discussions of focus groups. The author divided them into three groups, thus three focus groups were conducted. Two groups consisted of 8 students and one of 9 students. Discussions happened during that week in the Faculty of Philology and lasted not more than 40 minutes each. The groups were heterogeneous, where students of both genders and different English language level proficiency took place. The questions in focus group discussions were based on research questions developed for the present study.

3. Findings

Here are provided findings from the observation in the four EFL classes while the author of the study took notes to further present the investigation and findings from three focus group discussions with students as participants of the research paper.

3.1. Observation classroom findings

The main goal of the classroom observations was to identify the extent of the use of differentiated instruction by English language teachers in the EFL classes. In this way the engagement of students in the classroom would be explored, regardless of their language level proficiency. What the author of the study noted at first was that the teachers gave more importance the students’ participation and their presence rather than taking care to manage the classroom, which needed a little attention.

Teachers mostly used the same material based on the literature provided in the planned syllabus. In the case of syntax as a subject that requires fixed models, such a thing is acceptable since there is not much space for flexibility. But, at this course, it was not noticed any effort for differentiation in process that are different activities on practicing exercises. Based on the need that students have to practice as much as possible these models of syntax, it was not seen that the teacher offered students the opportunity to ask questions or to deal with the kind of task he had just taught to them.

But in case of the course ‘interpretation of the literary work’ where students have to analyze a poem or

paragraph, the teacher can provide additional material for students who have lower English language level proficiency compared to others and necessarily it engages all students in class assignments. The lecture was taught by power point presentation and students did not have needed time to take notes. According to the teacher, it is necessary to listen and follow since they have material to be based on later when they have to prepare for the exam. The class work was same for every student and the same analyze of a same poem was asked from students.

The differentiation was noted when applied by the teacher who taught theory and practice of translation. The lecture was taught by code switching in L1 in order to give clear instruction and appropriate explanation for students who need in deep clarification. Moreover, the differentiation was also noted when the teacher shared their classroom assignment by organizing the students according to their preparation. The teacher asked them for individual work, some in pairs and some in smaller groups consisting of three students or larger groups where they participated in a group of five or six students. It activated all the students indiscriminately. The teacher constantly monitored their work and provided additional instructions when asked.

Eventually, while observing the class of English for special purposes it was noted a great atmosphere in the classroom. Students were satisfied with the way this lectures were being taught by their teacher. Every lecture brought innovation to them. Every lecture had it interesting part during each lecture. The teacher used additional material to provide students with in order to meet everyone's needs. From theory to practice was the motto of this course. As the assignments were delivered, all the students showed willingness to learn and what made them feel motivated was when the teacher gave feedback to each individual and group as well, first referring to the work done and appreciating them for the effort and then carefully showing about the parts that need to be improved in the future.

3.2. Focus groups findings

The findings of the focus groups were extracted from discussions that were in line with research questions. The students showed not only readiness but also were curious to know about the differentiated instruction as their need to improve their EFL learning.

In summarizing the discussions of the three focus groups it will be presented a general overview of how much are differentiated instruction implemented by EFL teachers in Faculty of Philology at University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani". As far as the content as the component of what should be differentiated is concerned, students are not satisfied with the applied methods of teaching by their EFL teachers. The majority of teachers according to them are based on the literature they have planned in the syllabus at the beginning of the semester, without giving any spaces to the students to give any possible proposal. In cases when the teacher provides additional material or when the students are allowed to learn from another material that is suitable for them, a noticeable improvement in language learning is noted. Some students expressed dissatisfaction with the teaching style as they expressed, mainly when they are challenged in mixed ability classes.

According to students who participated in the focus group discussions, some teachers collaborate always with

strong students who have advanced English language level leaving others behind. One student expressed her feeling when studying in the classroom: 'sometimes I get disoriented when I see others being faster in response and I cannot reach them'. Others are not given the opportunity to show their skills, however small these skills may be. Some teachers show special attention to the weaker students and this makes advanced students to lose patience and the motive while waiting for the teacher to deal with them. This makes students who have the ability not to get additional knowledge because the teacher tends to engage weaker ones. Some try, but they hardly show any results while on the other hand there are students who are excellent but rarely appear active in the classroom.

Furthermore, not all students have financial support, either from the family or university to attend any private course. Some of them come from the rural zone and don't have network, which would help to listen English, music, movie or any debate on YouTube, etc. and neither have chance to communicate in English, so the practical work would happen and help a lot. They think it's the best way to improve learning by using differentiated instruction that is in their opinion defined as the best solution for learning improvement. We believe that differentiated instruction would help a lot in our EFL learning because we aren't same learners and what is considered helpful for a student, for others doesn't stand. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the assessment, asserting that it would be very facilitating if the teachers offered them some evaluation opportunities, such as a during term assessment that would complete the final grade or the portfolio's hold on a weekly basis. But also, according to them, compared to the methodology that teachers have been teaching EFL for many years during their previous education in primary and secondary school, nowadays, it is seen a great deal of progress because of the flexibility the teacher offers students with different activities. Students at Faculty of Philology are aware that implementation of differentiated instruction takes teachers time to know every student in the classroom and recognize their individual preferences, thus we appreciate teachers who have tried at first being flexible in explanations and exercises and found out the proper way that fits most the students' individual preferences.

4. Discussions

Of importance during the research of this study is that all students observed during the class and were part of the focus group discussions as well as teachers, see the application of differentiated instruction as a tool for improving the EFL learning. This study not only familiarizes teachers with the concept of differentiated instruction but also provides teachers with new ideas to use different teaching methods and strategies in order to meet the individual needs of students in the classroom. It was noticed that students performed better when the teacher gave clear instructions, sometimes even code switching in students' native language. Students welcomed working in pairs or groups because the help of associates helped them realize their part in the given task by the teacher, and others felt valuable when helping others. Moreover, teacher's motivation encouraged students to work. Also, evaluation and giving immediate feedback stimulated students to continue with the task either in class or to continue further at home.

5. Conclusions

Differentiated instruction as a teaching and learning tool plays a significant role in EF language learning and it can be concluded that EFL teachers should convert as far as possible traditional teaching methods to modern and effective ones. Of great importance is the teachers' effort to know as much as possible their students and their learning styles. If the teacher manages to know the readiness, interest, and his/her students' learning styles then it will be easier to apply teaching methods that best fit everyone. The teacher should know when and where to differentiate. At first, by differentiating the material and literature he/she will suit the English language level proficiency of each student. Second, by adopting different activities and teaching techniques in the classroom, students may find the way of learning that easier works for them. And finally, if EFL teacher offers needed opportunities to let students share their knowledge in different ways it would motivate them for further learning, which undoubtedly would positively affect their language improvement.

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