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Differentiated Instruction: Meeting the Needs of All Learners

Juanjuan Ouyang[1,a,*], Nanzhou Ye[1,b]

[1]*Boya International School, Jiangxi, University of Technology, Ziyang Avenue, Nanchang, China*
[a]*ouyangjuanjuan@jxut.edu.cn*, [b]*yenanzhou@jxut.edu.cn*
**Corresponding author*

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Abstract: Differentiated instruction is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead should be shaped to meet the needs of all students. This does not mean that teachers individually tailor instruction. Rather, they differentiate instruction for groups of students. It's a concept that can be infused into teaching of all students. If done properly, it can be a very effective method to stimulate students' learning interest and maximize their learning efficiency because it challenges all students. This article focuses on how to differentiate instructions for varied groups of students based on their background knowledge, readiness, learning profile, interests, learning habits, etc. The key concepts are: understanding the student, assessing the student, and maximizing learning efficiency. The article provides suggestions for differentiating instructions in terms of content, process, assignment, and assessment.

1. Introduction

Differentiated instruction is an approach whereby teachers adjust their curriculum and instruction to maximize the learning of all students: average learners, English language learners, struggling students, students with learning disabilities, and gifted and talented students. Differentiated instruction is not a single strategy but rather a framework that teachers can use to implement a variety of strategies. In the process of teaching, teachers use differentiated instruction strategies as a way to reach all learners based on their individual differences, current knowledge and learning profile, i.e., they set different teaching objectives and tasks for students at different levels and accommodate each student' s learning style to maximize the learning of all students.

2. Preparing students for differentiated instruction

At the beginning of the year, a teacher should set aside some time to discuss differentiated instruction with his or her students. This helps teachers and students develop a common understanding of what a differentiated classroom would look like and why it would be beneficial. With this understanding, students are more likely to buy into the idea of differentiated instruction. The students are divided into three groups: the low, middle, and high groups (Group A, B and C, respectively). Group A is mainly for advanced students with solid background knowledge, positive

learning attitude and high learning efficiency. Group B is for average learners with average learning profile, average learning attitude, and average learning ability. Group C is for struggling students with weak learning foundations, low interest in learning, and poor general learning ability. Before teachers can do this, however, they must first get to know their students in terms of readiness, learning profile, interests, learning habits, background knowledge, etc[1].

Differentiated instruction must be based on a comprehensive understanding of the differences of individual students. But how can teachers fully understand students' learning style? One very helpful tactic to learn about the students is the questionnaire. Through questionnaires, teachers are able to understand students' learning habits, cognitive level, language ability, and intellectual development, etc. What's more, teachers can also determine the level at which a student is working in a given subject area by viewing a student's academic record and communicating with students. Besides, there are always tests (formal and informal) we can turn to that will help us to get a more precise picture of the students' learning ability[2].

3. Differentiated instruction strategies

3.1. Differentiate content

When teachers differentiate content, the same concept or skill is taught to each student. However, the curriculum used to teach a concept or skill may differ for different students. There are a number of strategies that teachers can use to differentiate content. One way to differentiate content for heterogeneous classrooms is to stratify content. When teachers tier content, all students complete the same type of activity (e.g., worksheet, report), but the content varies in difficulty. Typically, students are divided into three groups based on readiness level. The activities assigned to the low, middle, and high groups (Group A, B, and C, respectively) differ in terms of complexity[3].

Another effective way to differentiate content is to provide students with a variety of materials. Teachers can provide students with texts of varying complexity that best suit each group. In addition to grade-level texts, teachers can provide texts below and above grade level. This allows students struggling with reading levels or skill complexity to access content at the level that works best for them. It also allows students who know the content or quickly master it to have the opportunity to work on more advanced skills[4].

Teachers can build an online library of diverse textbooks and supplemental materials suitable for group A, B, and C students, such as basic knowledge resources, practical communication resources, and innovative and advanced resources, among others. This library of material may grow over time as the teacher accumulates used and new books..Teachers can also create differentiated learning resource banks based on the emphasis on English listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation.

3.2. Differentiate Process

When teachers differentiate processes, they teach the same concept or skill to all students. However, the goals and requirements are set differently based on students' readiness, learning profile, interests, learning habits, background knowledge, etc. Teachers vary the teaching process by making differentiated teaching plans and activities, assigning different tasks, using different teaching tools, etc. They can decide how best to do this by taking into account their students' readiness levels, interests, or learning profiles[5].

One approach to differentiate processes for heterogeneous classrooms is to design tiered lessons. Teachers can break students into groups or pairs to work on different activities, or possibly assign individual tasks. When teachers tier a lesson, they design instructional tasks that are challenging for

students at different levels of readiness: low, middle, and high levels (Group A, B and C, respectively). While students should master the same content or core skills, the means by which they do so vary. Activities assigned to low, middle, and high groups tend to differ in complexity, depth of information, or level of abstraction. The table 1 below outlines features for a tiered lesson with three groups that target struggling, average, and advanced learners.

Table 1: Creating a tiered lesson

Group A: Advanced or gifted learners	**Group B: Average learners**	**Group C: Strugglers**
-Focus on independent learning.	- Focus on training students in basic language skills.	-Focus on developing students' interest in learning.
-The teacher sets tasks for students in the classroom, then inspires them to develop their own critical thinking through group discussion.	-The teacher helps students sort out and summarize what they have learned before teaching the new content;	-The teacher draws the attention of the class through various teaching activities and stimulates the interest of the students in learning.
- The students are expected not only to complete teaching tasks, but also to develop their own learning strategies.	-The students are expected to not only grasp what they are being taught in class, but also to improve their learning ability and efficiency.	-The students are expected to be fully engaged in the class and to understand what is being taught.

Before tiering a lesson on a particular skill or topic area, the teacher should pre-assess the students. She or he should then use that information to help assign students to each readiness level and start designing lessons.

3.3. Differentiate assignment

Differentiated assignments do not lock students into ability boxes. Instead, particular student clusters are assigned specific tasks within each group according to their readiness and comprehension without making them feel completely compartmentalized away from peers at different achievement levels. Tiering can be based on challenge level where student groups will work on different assignments. Teachers can help them develop tasks of structure or questions at various levels. The table 2 below illustrates how a teacher can assign different assignments to students at different levels[6].

Table 2: Creating differentiated assignments

Group A (Advanced or gifted learners):
- Students who need content reinforcement or practice will complete activities that help build understanding. - Students are assigned independent reading that is less difficult. - Students are required to complete the assignment with fewer steps. - Students are expected to converge on “right answers” to solve problems.
Group B (Average learners):
- Students who have a general understanding will complete activities that consolidate what they’ve learned. - Students are assigned independent reading material from textbooks or other grade-level sources. - Students are required to complete the assignment with more steps. - Students are expected to deal with questions or problems that are a mix of open-ended and “right answers.”
Group C (Strugglers):
- Students who have a firm understanding will complete activities that extend what they already know. - Students are assigned to read material from sources more complex than the textbook, if possible. - Students are required to infer and evaluate the assignment. - Students are expected to focus on abstract concepts as much as possible and use open-ended questions exclusively.

3.4. Differentiate assessment

When teachers differentiate assessment, they set different criteria, content and methods of assessment for different student groups or pairs, and offer their students a variety of ways to demonstrate their knowledge (e.g., presentation, video, written report). Teachers use differentiated assessment methods to ensure that students at all levels are being properly assessed. Assessments may be formal (e.g., a unit test) or informal (e.g., an exit card). By using more than one type of assessment, teachers can gain a better understanding of how to teach a content or a skill to a diverse group of students in the classroom. Though students will work on different activities and demonstrate their knowledge through a variety of products, teachers can accurately evaluate student performance using formative assessment or summative assessment[7].

3.4.1. Formative assessment

In any classroom, the teacher is expected to assess the performance of the students. Formative assessment is particularly useful for evaluating how students' learning, attitudes, beliefs, and creativity grow over the span of the course. Formative assessment is conducted throughout the course, assessing students' learning performance in terms of class attendance, class performance, assignment completion, group discussion, and quiz scores, etc. At regular intervals (e.g., four weeks, eight weeks), the teacher makes an assessment of students' performance, and the results of the evaluation are shared with students and their parents in the form of a report card. Formative assessment allows teachers to more accurately evaluate a student' s mastery of content or a skill than a single assessment such as a test that captures one moment in time. Formative assessment also allows a student to reflect on his or her performance over time and to perhaps establish future goals[8].

3.4.2. Summative assessment

Summative assessments are given to students at the end of a course and should measure the skills and knowledge a student has gained over the entire instructional period. Summative feedback is aimed at helping students to understand how far they have come in meeting the learning goals of the course, what they need further work on, and what they should study next[9].

When teachers differentiate assessment, they use different summative assessments that are better suited to measuring different kinds of learning. For example, examinations are useful for evaluating student learning in terms of remembering information, and understanding and applying concepts and ideas. However, exams may be less suited to evaluating how well students are able to analyze or innovate related to what they' ve learned. On the other hand, presentations can be useful for assessing a student's ability to critically analyze and evaluate a topic or content. Meanwhile, projects are useful for evaluating learning objectives that require high levels of critical thinking, creativity, and coordination. Projects are good opportunities to provide summative feedback because they often build on prior formative assessments and feedback.

4. Conclusion

Traditional teaching methods are based on a model in which the teacher delivers instructions, typically through lectures, and then demonstrates the skills on a blackboard or overhead projector. When the teacher is done, he or she will give the students practice work, usually from standardized textbooks or handouts. In a traditional classroom setting, not all students' needs are met and some students with learning disabilities, for example, might fall behind and get bored of school. Unlike traditional teaching methods, differentiated instruction is a teaching approach that tailors instruction

to all students' learning needs. Instead of teaching the whole group in one way (like a lecture), a teacher uses a bunch of different methods to accommodate the needs of all learners, thus maximizing learning efficiency[10].

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