DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN ACCOMMODATING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES OF EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms all around the globe are full of students with individual differences. Evidently, the students possess individual differences because they come from various settings with diverse backgrounds. The divergences among students might be unique in nature and they could possibly affect the English teaching and learning process. One of the clear examples is the fact that not all learning instructions provided by teachers are effective in accommodating the differences in the classroom. This situation leads to the emergence of implementing differentiated instruction, often believed to be able to give the students equal chances to learn and experience English effectively at their full potential. This library-based paper reviews several previous practices of differentiated instruction in English classrooms. Further, it attempts to examine how differentiated instruction has been implemented in various EFL contexts. It also attempts to reveal the fundamental reasons behind the success of differentiated instruction in the many English classrooms by relating theories and practices of the previous research studies focused on the topic. This paper ends with a summary of the various findings and discusses it in the light of theories and literatures in differentiated instruction with a particular interest in EFL settings.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Individual Differences, EFL, ELT

INTRODUCTION

Recently, most of classrooms in EFL settings are commonly filled with a number of students who possess individual differences. This might be due to the fact that the students have various backgrounds which could affect their schemata. For instances, some students might come from big cities bringing the knowledge of advanced technologies and some others might come from rural areas having less knowledge of advanced technologies. Some of them have well-educated parents who are ready to fully support their studies meanwhile some others do not have. The individual differences might be unique but they might actually affect teaching and learning process, especially the learning instruction that teachers give in the classroom. According to Borja, Soto, and Sanchez (2015), one learning instruction which is provided by the teacher might not be able to fit all of the students' individual differences in one classroom. Experts claim that this situation directs to the urgency of the differentiated instruction practice which is generally assumed to be able to give the students equal chances to learn English effectively.

The implementation of differentiated instruction offers an opportunity to facilitate the differences among the students in any class size. In fact, the students with individual differences expect to have a supportive learning which promotes diversity that they learn at varied rates and in various ways. Moreover, the implementation might also be useful for the students in recognizing their abilities, and respecting their works.

Hence, the students need to experience differentiated instruction which is able to provide variety, choices, challenges, complexity, and chances to demonstrate their potentials and capabilities (Heacox, 2012). In addition, through the implementation of differentiated instruction, teachers are able to accommodate the content, process, or product within their instruction (Borja et al., 2015). The students may also have equal and, of course, better chances to develop their competence in learning the language in the classroom. Therefore, it becomes possible for the students to have the most effective and efficient way in their learning.

Considering the interesting and promising traits that differentiated instruction offers, a study which aims to generally review the practices of the differentiated instruction in relation with the theories is definitely worth to be conducted. Therefore, this library-based paper analyses several previous studies which covered and dealt with differentiated instruction practices in EFL classrooms. Further, this paper is carefully designed to investigate how differentiated instruction has been implemented in several EFL contexts. This paper exposes the accomplishments of differentiated instruction in the classrooms by relating theories and practices of the former research studies. Finally, it provides a brief closing remark which is based on the several findings and a discussion related to theories and practices of differentiated instruction.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Students who attend EFL classes today possess individual differences that can be noticed and identified thoroughly. According to Tomlinson (2001), individual differences are able to be categorized into different learning profile, different interest, and different readiness. Further, Tomlinson (2001) also states that the diverse cultures students have could influence the learning profiles or styles such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic that the students favor the most in the learning subject in the classroom. Thus in the classroom, some particular students tend to have their preferable ways in learning. In the process of learning things, some of them prefer to watch something like short videos, movie clips, TV shows, and other visual media, some prefer to listen to tapes, music, recording, and other audio, and some others prefer to actuate their learning by implementing body movement like performing roleplay or maybe by operating learning tools and other stuffs. Additionally, Tomlinson (2001) explains that the students also have various interests which are based on their emotional and social development. Oftentimes, students are different in favoring the topic and intensity of the lesson in the classroom. Some of them like to learn things that are familiar and closely related to their daily lives and some others like to learn things that are unfamiliar and new to their current world. Moreover, Tomlinson (2001) argues that students also possess different readiness levels in learning. Some students might already have high level of readiness since they are familiar with particular topics that they could possibly meet in their previous experience and some others might have low level of readiness since they are not familiar with the topics. Thus, the different readiness might be able to affect the effectiveness of the lessons and instructions given by the teacher which are originally intended to support the students' comprehension. Therefore, considering the aspects mentioned above, EFL classrooms need to be equipped with certain effective ways to facilitate the individual differences possessed by the students that are from different backgrounds.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Experts claim that differentiated instruction is a kind of model which enables the students to learn in different ways based on their unique and valuable individual differences. Heacox (2012) states that differentiated instruction is defined as a type of instruction which addresses effective learning for varied individuals, gives the students proper chances to learn at their full potential, and develops instructional activities based on the students' diversity as well as displays multiple possible ways to learning language in the classroom. Differentiated instruction allows students to start learning from the appropriate level based upon their prior knowledge and allows them to begin building deeper meaning and understanding from the content (Hogan, 2009). It is created based on what is essential in the learning, attending to student differences, teacher/student collaboration regarding learning expectations, and uniting assessment and instruction (Logan, 2011).

In differentiated instruction, the instruction or the teaching and learning process is established to meet the students' needs and to be relevant for every student according to their different characteristics by bridging their individual differences into a meaningful learning. This is supported by Tomlinson (2000) who states that differentiated instruction provides an instruction and learning activities that are interesting and related to each student which might allow them to experience many different roles and settings in learning in the classroom. In addition, Butt and Kausar (2010) imply that differentiated instruction is basically a way of planning an instruction, so that one lesson can be gradually taught to the entire class while properly meeting the individual needs of each student in the classroom.

Differentiated instruction aims at enabling the learners who are different from each other to reach the common goal of the lesson. It means that, even though, the process of learning that they have might be different, the goal that they attempt to achieve should be the same. This statement is justified by Levy (2008) who implies that the focus of differentiated instruction is to ensure that all students are able to reach the same academic goal provided in the classroom. The classroom might employ a unique process of arriving at the goal because the process is different for each student as they are taught differently according to their diversity. Furthermore, Robinson, Maldonado, and Whaley (2014) explain that differentiated instruction is a way of teaching which is able to help the students to possibly reach a common goal, regardless the differences that they possess in the classroom.

According to Tomlinson (2001), there are three general elements that should be taken into account in order to make differentiated instruction more manageable and meaningful. The elements are content, process, and product. Generally, they are able to be utilized in the teaching and learning process. Thus, it is possible for the teachers to effectively differentiate the lesson they conduct based on the content, process, and product.

Differentiating Content

Heacox (2012) states that content can be regarded as topics and concepts of language learning conducted in the classroom. The content can be differentiated according to the student's readiness level, interests, or learning profile (Tomlinson, 2001). The students' readiness, interests, and learning profile can be analysed and classified through the implementation of placement test and distribution of questionnaires in the beginning of the teaching and learning process. In order to differentiate the content in a proper manner, teachers may provide the students with suitable resources and materials. Being suitable in this context means that the resources and materials should be in accordance with the level of comprehension, the learning preferences, and the learning profile that the students possess.

Differentiating Process

In differentiating the process, teachers need to consider the students learning profiles and interests (Heacox, 2012). In addition, Tomlinson (2005) in Santangelo and Tomlinson (2012) states that teaching process can be done by conducting activities focusing on the sense-making process. He adds that this process might allow the students to think, work, and also personalize the content in a proper way. It is also stated that different formats of grouping are also important to differentiate the process. For instance, students may be divided into groups according to their level of readiness, interests, profiles, or by their own preferences in the teaching and learning. Thus, the process that they encounter might not be similar, but they basically aim to achieve the same learning goal.

Differentiating Product

Heacox (2012) argues that the product of the students' learning includes the representation of what they have learned from particular amount of instruction they receive in the classroom. Further, Tomlinson, (as cited in Santangelo and Tomlinson, 2012) states that products should be able to facilitate the capability of the students in thinking, applying, and demonstrating everything the students have learned from the lesson. In order to differentiate the product within their class, teachers should have their students demonstrate their skills through a set of different activities which must be based on the lessons that the students have learned in the classroom individually, pairs, or in groups.

MANAGING ACTIVITIES IN DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Differentiated instruction offers flexibility in the arrangement of classroom activities that most of regular teachers can conduct. Tomlinson (2001) explains that, in applying differentiated instruction, the students can learn as an individual, whole class, or in groups. The teachers are also able to manage the combination of the activities by starting as whole class to begin the study, moving to individual work in answering questions, coming together to share things in groups, and working again as individual to present the results in front of the whole class. In managing the preferred activities, the teachers are expected to select wisely and creatively which types of activities to be used based on the classrooms condition and students' characteristics.

One of the most frequently used activities in implementing differentiated instruction is the group work. Grouping which is often assigned in differentiated instruction is called flexible grouping. Many experts believe that flexible grouping is an effective way of providing differences among students within a single classroom. Hall in Nordlund (2003) defines it as a type of grouping in which the students are not assigned to the same group for each task or area of study. Hall adds that in flexible grouping, the students can be placed in a group based on their levels of readiness, interest, or learning profile and they can interact with their peers without being identified with specific group or ability level. In addition, Nordlund (2003) implies that flexible grouping means placing the students in instructional groups for a specific skill, unit of study, or other learning opportunity based on readiness, interest, or learning profile. In flexible groupings, the students learn about the same topic, however, they differ in the specific skills to be addressed and in the depth and complexity of the topic based on the learning needs (Rogers, 1996). Since learners are evaluated prior to instruction on their preexisting knowledge for each concept, the groups change to meet each learner's needs for the concepts and topics in the educational unit (Richards & Omdal, 2007). Flexible grouping offers various advantages for the students in learning. Flexible grouping provides opportunities for the students to have a group based on their levels of readiness, interest, or learning profile. Students are also allowed to have an interaction with specific level of competence. Furthermore, this type of grouping also gives the students chance to learn effectively since it does not give improper burden for the students to learn at their level. Thus, it is possible for the learning process to meet the learners' needs.

Managing activities in differentiated instruction can be done by using one of the most commonly used ways which is called as tiered task. Tiered task, or often referred to as tiered assignment is a way of delivering an instruction differently on the students without neglecting the objectives of the lesson that they have to achieve. Lewis and Batts (2005) defines tiered task as the assignment designed at different levels of complexity according to students' level of readiness. In line with this statement, Johnson (2001) implies that tiered task is where the students learn about the same concept or skill but they learn in differing levels of complexity and sophistication. Hall as cited in Nordlund (2003) adds further that tiered task is designed to instruct all students based on the same objectives, allowing the students to process the information and gain understanding at their own ability level by possessing different complexity levels. Tiered task is a good way to stay focused on the standards and curriculum while maintaining flexibility in content, process, and product by allowing the students to arrive at the understanding of those according to their interest, readiness, and learning profile (Hogan, 2009). In implementing tiered task, Allen et al. (2008) suggest the teachers divide and think of the tiered task based on the following circumstances. They are tier 1, tier 2, and tier 3. Tier 1 is the situation in which the students need help as they do not have the basic skills or background knowledge. Hence, the teacher needs to build their skills and knowledge to meet the standard. Tier 2 is the situation where the students understand the material and have the knowledge for the standard of that grade level or subject. Meanwhile, tier 3 situation shows that the students need to be challenged with more depth and complexity. They need some direction from the teacher but they will be mostly independent. Therefore, it can be inferred that tiered task or

tiered assignment is one model of differentiating instructions by distinguishing the tasks according to the level of complexity while maintaining the objectives set for the lesson or the level.

In brief, it can be inferred that differentiated instruction is a flexible way of delivering a meaningful learning by taking into account the students' individual differences. It can be done by differentiating the content, the process, and even the product of the lesson. Moreover, the activities can be arranged so that the students can work as an individual, whole class, or in groups. Differentiated instruction can be further empowered by flexible grouping and tiered task as well. Thus, every option is possible to be used as long as the activities fit the classroom condition. Furthermore, differentiated instruction is recommended to be implemented because it meets the students with different and mixed-ability to be able to meet the common goal set for them and it allows the students to learn according to their differences, such as levels of readiness and interests.

PRACTICES OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Several research studies in differentiated instruction have been carried out in some EFL settings. Chien (2012) conducted a study about the implementation differentiated instruction in an elementary school EFL classroom. The study was designed to focus on how three components of differentiated instruction (process, content, and product), as suggested by Tomlinson (2001), could be applied in an elementary school EFL classroom. This study was conducted in Taiwan with sixth graders as the participants. A particular book was used as a vocabulary review for the students in the beginning of the semester. Within the process of the study, differentiated instruction was used in pulling out students who have lower proficiency levels. The content and product were also differentiated to support the teaching and learning process of the students. It revealed that the students could study the materials based on their proper levels and their own pace. They are able choose their tasks based on their own learning preferences. Therefore, the students were able to continue working in different tasks with no partners, with partners, in groups, or with the help of the teacher. The students showed that they liked and enjoyed to have such options like playing games related to word concentration or testing the spelling of their partners, because they considered that they had been given their own independence to learn English. It became clear that, in this study, teacher of English was able differentiate the content, process, and also product to accommodate students learning needs, styles, and preferences. From the research result it showed that what Heacox (2012) stated about differentiated instruction was true since it could provide effective learning for students with different characteristics, maximize the students' potential in learning, and allow teachers to develop instructional activities with multiple ways to learning based on the students' individual differences.

Alavinia and Farhady (2012) conducted a study about differentiated instruction implemented in teaching vocabulary in mixed ability classes with a focus on multiple intelligences and learning styles. It was done in Iran Language Institute in Urmia and there were 60 learners who were involved in the study. They were later arranged to form two equal groups which consist of 30 members. The learners were asked to join the pre-

test and to take questionnaires of multiple intelligences and learning styles. After obtaining the results, the researchers divided the learners into five different categories termed visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. The researchers, then, determined the experimental and control groups. The experimental group was given instructions based on their intelligence and learning styles. Meanwhile, the control group was given the conventional way without differentiation in the teaching and learning process. After conducting the treatments, the researchers administered post-test and analysed the results. The findings showed that there was a significant amount of difference between the performances of two groups. It seemed that the group which received differentiated instruction produced a better performance on the post-test. Moreover, when working in small groups, the students felt more contended and confident. It is in line with Tomlinson (2001) who mentions that differentiated instruction could respond to the students' interests and needs which enable the students to perform well in learning. Then, it could be inferred that the implementation of differentiated instruction gave a positive effect of the learning process.

Other researchers, Aliakbari and Haghighib (2014) carried out a study about the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in the enhancement of Iranian learners reading comprehension in separate gender education. The study aimed at exploring the effectiveness of differentiated instruction and traditional-based pedagogy in the reading comprehension of male and female learners in separate gender education. In this study, the researcher differentiated content, process, and also product. This is related to what Tomlinson (2001) said that, in making differentiated instruction manageable, the teacher could differentiate the content, process and product. There were two groups, control and experimental, assigned from 47 elementary school students of a language institute in Iran. Each category consisted of one male classroom and female classroom. The control group received conventional instruction strategies. Meanwhile, the experimental group was given differentiated instruction such as flexible grouping, tiered instruction and tiered assignments. The grouping chosen by the researcher indicated that teachers could freely choose the possible ways in applying differentiated instruction where the students could work as individual, with whole class, or in groups, as stated by Tomlinson (2001). After conducting test and analysing the results, it was found that female students of experimental group performed better than the male ones as the control group in the test. The study revealed that the implementation of differentiated instruction in the form of flexible grouping, tiered instruction, and tiered assignments is effective to support elementary students in the process of learning reading comprehension. Therefore, it is true that placing the students in instructional groups for a particular skill, study unit, or learning chance based on readiness, interest, or learning profile could help the students in learning (Nordlund, 2003). Furthermore, as the results of the study have been stated, the researchers implied that standard curriculum could not meet the needs of all learners of the same proficiency level. The researchers, then, suggested that teachers should try to design instruction which can meet the students' interests and needs.

DISCUSSION

The practices of differentiated instruction had proven that differentiated instruction was somewhat effective to support the learning needs of the students. This could be derived from the results of the practices conducted by Chien in 2012, Alavinia

and Farhady in 2012, and Aliakbari and Haghighib in 2014. As stated previously, the practices themselves had been done through several EFL settings which involved various types of students from the areas of concern. The results exposed that the students who received the implementation of differentiated instruction in the classrooms showed significant progress in their language learning. Having the results read thoroughly, there were two main aspects to be taken into account that might influence the results of the practices.

The first aspect was the favourable ways in implementing differentiated instruction. It could clearly be inferred from those practices that the implementation of differentiated instruction might involve the three favourable ways of differentiation. The favourable ways used in the practices were such as differentiated content, differentiated process, and differentiated product which were basically the same with what had been suggested by Tomlinson (2001). Thus, it could be learnt from the aforementioned studies that the success of differentiated instruction implementation was possible to be achieved because of the proper choices and customization of the aforementioned ways which the teachers made and used in applying differentiated instruction. They were essentially needed in order to suit the students' differences properly.

The second was the consideration of differentiation. Considering that different settings required different treatments, the teachers needed to carefully focus on several important considerations as well. The considerations taken in differentiated instruction were such as students' needs, the types of activities, and the types of differentiated instruction. As the matter of fact, they were crucial points needed to be taken into account in order to make sure that the implementation of differentiated instruction went well and reached the expected outcomes of the learning. In that way, the practices showed that apparently the students were more comfortable to learn a lesson with differentiated instruction adjusted to their learning needs and preferences.

CONCLUSION

Reviewing the theories and the practices leads to a conclusion that the application of differentiated instruction might be effective in supporting the learning of the students with diverse characteristics. Presumably, both theories and practices show parallel supposition that differentiated instruction could meet the students' interests and needs which enable the students to perform successfully in learning English. The success is achieved due to teachers' careful considerations in selecting elements of differentiated instruction to be implemented in the classroom. Thus, most of the students who receive differentiated instruction are generally more relaxed and confident to learn English based on their learning needs and preferences. Taken together, this paper has demonstrated theoretical and practical advances of differentiated instruction for further recommendations particularly in the EFL classrooms. In practical sphere, differentiated instruction has proven to be able to assist teachers in fairly accommodating EFL students' individual differences.

Considering that this study is limited on its focus in reviewing theories and practices on how differentiated instruction has been successfully applied in different EFL contexts, further research studies are likely possible to be conducted. The first suggested research study is a survey on how the students' perspectives influence their

preferences when they learn with differentiated instruction. Then, the second one is a study focused on designing suitable EFL materials that can support the implementation of differentiated instruction to the students in particular learning levels. Approximately, this could be done in order to provide learning materials which are able to ease the teachers in implementing differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms which are filled with students possessing individual differences.

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