

DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY IN NON-LINGUISTIC UNIVERSITY ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING THROUGH ACTIVITY MODIFICATION

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Abstract. In the context of English language teaching in non-linguistic Russian universities differentiation is necessary to ensure every student language development in typically mixed ability groups of students. The paper discussed the reasons for implementing differentiated English language instruction into the practice of tertiary language education and states the lack of research into this area. Research is needed to provide research-based evidence to support activity modification as an efficient tool of differentiated language instruction in Russian non-linguistic universities. Differentiated instruction principles are being discussed and activity/task modification matrix is being proposed to guide English language university teachers in the absence of differentiated instruction focus both at the stage of pre-service teacher education and at the stage of further in-service teacher training and development.

Keywords: differentiation, differentiated instruction, mixed-ability groups, heterogeneous groups, English language teaching, task modification, activity or task modification.

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Introduction

The concept of differentiation is not new, it has been extensively explored in English language teaching and remains a hot topic nowadays [3, 13, 14, 17]. The idea of differentiation is deeply rooted in respect for student diversity and acknowledgement of learner differences. Differentiation can be defined as a language teaching philosophy which is driven by the desire to help all students thrive. Among many well-worded definitions of differentiated instruction (DI) the

following one appears to be laconic: “Differentiated teaching in the classroom consisting of planned adaptations in process, learning time, content, product or learning environment for groups of students or individual students” [17, p.6].

In my view, however, differentiation is most relevant for teaching groups, not individuals. When teaching individuals there is more room for individualization which can be paced to individual learning needs. For example, learners can take longer to progress through a given topic, skip topics that cover information they already know, or dwell upon topics they need more time to process, while differentiation refers to instruction that is tailored to the learning needs of different learners who are part of a group [1]. Learning goals are the same for all students, but the method or approach of instruction can vary according to the learning needs of each student or according to what works best for students like them. Thus, group teaching, with the same course objectives for groups of learners, calls for differentiated instruction (DI). To differentiate learning, teachers identify different learner variables within one group and analyse this data, and, from this data, teachers can use, adapt, or create modified activities, tasks or resources around the same objectives for the same group of learners. In a differentiated language teaching, learners are identified on the basis of their challenges in a specific language knowledge area and/or language skills levels. As non-linguistic university language syllabus is rarely differentiated, university teachers face the challenge to differentiate instruction. So, DI is a pedagogical-didactical approach that provides teachers with a starting point for meeting students’ diverse learning needs [16].

Although DI has gained a lot of attention in practice and research in secondary education, not much is known about the status of the empirical evidence and its benefits for enhancing student achievement in tertiary education. While there are reviews of the literature on DI in secondary schools to

provide both the theoretical conceptualizations of DI and findings on its effectiveness are being evaluated and summarized, papers with a specific focus on DI in higher education are still not many [5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 20]. While one can find papers on describing studies on generic teacher training for DI, ability grouping (streaming and tracking), individualization and heterogeneous grouping, there are very few papers describing any effects of DI on undergraduate students' language learning progress and achievement. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the possible benefits of DI in university language classrooms and more research is required to draw convincing conclusions regarding DI's effectiveness for tertiary language learning at non-linguistic universities. Clearly, differentiation research results and successful practices in secondary education cannot be generalized directly to tertiary education, since the language education in non-linguistic universities is quite different in nature. "Differentiated instruction should prepare learners for a smooth transition from the world of academia to the world of work through a new learning model not just to respond to student diversity but also to align with high social demands." [9, p.17].

Language teaching in a non-linguistic university

In non-linguistic universities in Russia, a two-year English language course mostly offers one year of Academic English, followed by another year of English for Specific Purposes according to their degree or specialization. Undergraduate students in non-linguistic universities are grouped to learn a foreign language not on the basis of their language level but according to their specialization, and, thus, there is no or little effort to form groups on the basis of students' language proficiency. Hence, nearly every group is a mixed-ability group or a heterogeneous group on the basis of students' language level, language aptitude, previous knowledge of English, motivation, intellectual maturity, cognitive style

and diligence. Thus, DI is critical in higher education due to student diversity in language proficiency and background knowledge.

University management urge teachers to adapt their instruction to the diverse learning needs of students in their language classrooms, however, the university curricula are far from being differentiated and, therefore, university language teachers have to proactively modify their teaching methods, resources and learning activities to better meet students' learning needs and to ensure their progress in the target language. Basically, whenever teachers deliberately plan such adaptations to facilitate students' language learning and execute these adaptations during their lessons we call it differentiation in action, the ultimate goal of which is to maximize the potential for all and every student success. According to C.A. Tomlinson, who explained the model of differentiated instruction and provided a framework to facilitate the standards of inclusion and adapted learning, "differentiation is student-aware teaching which recognizes and teaches according to learner differences" [18, 19]. We fully agree that teachers must be well aware of "who they are teaching as well as what they are teaching [15] and, together with H.L. Pham, we believe that "differentiation is a combination of both conceptual orientation and practical implication" [9, p.18].

However, research aimed at investigating how teachers define the concept of differentiation and its challenges indicated that university teachers' definition was primarily associated with the following three components: use of different strategies, addressing student diversity, and advancement of student learning [14]. According to this study, university teachers have a somewhat limited understanding of DI concept with misconceptions and false assumptions. "Additionally, six major challenges that impede successful implementation of DI were identified including (1) time, (2) resources, (3) knowledge, (4) class size, (5) support, and (6) workload" [14, p.326]. So, there is a clear need to introduce DI in

the pre-service language teacher education, to make DI part of their in-service training and, in an ideal world, to engage language teachers into an ongoing professional development aiming at acquiring expertise in DI. It basically means that differentiation should come into focus in teacher education as a conceptual framework and a philosophy behind teaching.

Teaching heterogeneous groups, English language teachers face typical challenges and constantly need to choose materials that will provide value for all the class; to design classroom activities to provide a challenge for more advanced students while not neglecting the slower ones; to identify themes/topics which will appeal to most of students; to find time to help slower students catch up with the stronger ones; to deal with the frustration of students who feel “out of it”; to cater for different learner styles; to provide opportunities for the students to develop their thinking as individuals and, finally, to do all this with limited preparation time and limited support. So, secondly, there is a need for systemic teacher support at institutional level. Teaching heterogeneous groups of language learners should not be isolated as a “problem” or as an “issue”, but be integrated into teacher training programs as an integral part of a language teacher competence and a core component of teacher proficiency.

In what way and to what extent can textbooks support university language teachers? Published textbooks are essential in language teaching as they provide a coherent syllabus and structure to the teaching and learning process. While textbooks are a key component in most academic English language programs, textbooks of English for specific purposes availability depends on the existing demand to a high degree. English for Oil and Gas, English for Hospitality Industry and Tourism, English for Energy, English for Business and Management, English for Medicine and English for Law are available, but there are many professional areas where ESP textbooks are virtually non-existent. It basically means that

university language teachers cannot always rely on textbooks and even if there is a published textbook for a specific purpose, there is no guarantee that it would perfectly match the language level of each student in a group. Learning how to use and adapt textbooks is hence an important part of a teacher's professional knowledge. English language teachers have considerably benefitted from textbooks that contribute considerably to both teaching and learning processes.

Nevertheless, in most non-native contexts, Russia being one of them, course materials and textbooks mostly are imported from native-speaking countries. The use of foreign materials increases the risk that textbook materials elements might not fully match the national educational standards, the university curriculum or the local context including culture, ideology, educational tradition or the combination of the several mentioned above. The role of textbooks in a language program together with their advantages and limitations were listed by Richards [12] and he claimed that textbooks may not reflect students' needs since they are often written for global markets they often do not reflect the interests and needs of students and hence may require adaptation. Such adaptations can be based on achievement/readiness or another relevant student variable (such as prior knowledge, learning preferences, and interest) with the goal of meeting students' learning needs. Adaptations that are merely organizational, such as placing students in homogeneous groups without adapting the teaching to relevant inter-learner differences, are not feasible in a university context. Streaming or tutoring students outside the classroom are not an option either. Therefore, it is necessary to provide teachers with adequate support, guiding and aiding them with a rich array of resources and technical assistance so that they are well-equipped and well-supported to introduce DI in their university classrooms in a systemic way and on a regular basis.

Activity or task modification matrix as differentiation strategy

It has been mentioned earlier that textbook adaptations can take different forms and one possible way of adaptation is task or activity modification [2]. Textbook tasks, exercises and activities may need to be changed to give them an additional focus. For example, a listening activity that focuses only on listening for information is adapted so that better-prepared students listen and take notes while slow students fill the gapped script.

Regarding mixed-ability or heterogeneous groups, they are typically divided into three sub-groups on the basis of their language proficiency: stronger or better-prepared students, weaker or slower students and the average. Every new group of learners has to be thoroughly examined and explored so that its language teacher identifies every learner's ability in the knowledge of the language systems (grammar, lexis and phonology) and in the four language skills: receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing). Thus in every type of classroom language work and for every planned activity or task the teacher will be able to foresee and make predictions who among learners might find it too complicated, who might finish it fast, who might lack challenge and get bored, who will need support and help. On the basis of this unique knowledge the teacher will be able to identify in what way this activity or task need to be modified and in accordance with which differentiation principle. According to Tomlinson, differentiation principles include differentiation by content (by input, by task, by level of complexity, by interest), differentiation by process (by support or autonomy, by time/pace, by groupings, by learning activity, by negotiation), by product (by outcome, by reproduction or production, by open or closed tasks, by creativity) and by learning environment [18, 19].

Activity or task modification helps teachers scaffold language learning by breaking down complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps. "By modifying

activities to provide additional support, such as visual aids, simplified instructions, or sentence frames, teachers can facilitate comprehension, language production, and overall language acquisition” [12, p.5]. For the learner to be successful, the teacher must be able to modify the given language-learning activity in the best interest of students. The textbook doesn't know students' profiles, their strengths and lacks, but the teacher does. The teacher has the unique knowledge of potential sources of mismatch between the requirements of the planned activities and tasks and the students' abilities and potential to inform the modification process so that every language learner is involved in a meaningful activity and, as a result, the desired outcomes are achieved. Task modification competence can ensure an all-inclusive language classroom with no student left behind [4].

Activity modification is highly relevant and important in the context of teaching English to students of non-linguistic universities for a number of reasons. Firstly, activity modification allows language teachers to differentiate their instruction based on the diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles of English language learners. By modifying activities, teachers can provide appropriate and meaningful learning experiences that cater to individual students' language proficiency levels, cultural backgrounds, and prior knowledge. Secondly, activity modification helps teachers scaffold language learning by breaking down complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps. By modifying activities to provide additional support, such as visual aids, simplified instructions, or sentence frames, teachers can facilitate comprehension, language production, and overall language acquisition. Thirdly, activity modification ensures that English language learning activities are accessible and inclusive for all students, including those with language-related challenges. By adapting activities to accommodate different learning styles, abilities, and needs, teachers create an inclusive classroom

environment that fosters equal participation and engagement. One more reason is that activity modification allows teachers to design activities that are authentic and meaningful to English language learners. By tailoring activities to students' interests, cultural backgrounds, and real-world contexts, teachers can enhance motivation, engagement, and the application of language skills in practical situations. On top of all the stated above, activity modification facilitates the development of various language domains, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Teachers can modify activities to focus on specific language skills, provide opportunities for practice and reinforcement, and gradually increase the complexity and challenge level as students progress in their language proficiency. Finally, activity modification enables teachers to design assessment tasks and provide targeted feedback that align with students' language development goals. By adapting assessment activities to match students' proficiency levels, teachers can accurately gauge their progress, identify areas for improvement, and provide constructive feedback for further language development.

Activity modification promotes a learner-centred approach to language instruction. By adapting activities to meet the specific needs language learners, teachers can create a supportive and engaging learning environment that maximizes language acquisition and overall student success.

Having discussed the reasons behind the need for modifying activities or tasks, we need to identify the general strategy for activity modifications in university language lessons and how many modifications are needed to cater for all students' needs. For these purposes, task or activity modification matrix has been proposed (see table 1 below) as a tool for planning and preparation for each and every language lesson as part of the university teaching routine.

Table 1. Task or activity modification matrix

Differentiation focus	Low achievers	Average achievers	High achievers
Teaching materials	Finely-tuned input (i-1) (adapted texts, audio/video & shorter fragments)	Textbook input	Roughly-tuned input (i+1) (authentic texts, audio/video & longer fragments)
Learning activity/task	Presenting/explaining – gaps, lacks, fossilized errors Guided discovery, controlled practice Low Order Thinking Skills (LOTS)	According to the textbook unit (supplementary pages)	Discovery learning Free practice 'Teacherless' tasks Data-driven learning High Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)
Grouping option	pair work (in motion) small group work + teacher Partner of S's choice or teacher	The grouping suggested by the textbook	Individual work pair work (fixed) Grouping strong students
Level of support	Scaffolding strategies Supportive task sheets & materials Correction & supportive feedback Stronger students or teachers as a resource	Textbook support (reference pages, materials)	Student autonomy Exploring & experimenting Correction & constructive feedback
Learning outcomes	Language reproduction (time limit) Shorter written task Practice language output	Standard requirements according to the current language level	Language production (time limit) Longer written tasks Communicative language output

There seems a lack of comprehensive research into different aspects of activity modifications in English language teaching university context. In Russian universities, almost all language programs utilize textbooks as a major classroom resource and language teachers are expected to follow the textbook and to use its tasks and activities. However, most groups are heterogeneous and, for this reason, it is crucial for language teachers to critically analyze the activities given

in textbooks and modify them to cater their students' needs [10]. Consequently, appropriate activity modification to meet learners' needs is necessary for an improved teaching and learning process.

Task modifications can be either planned or spontaneous, the latter being characteristic of truly proficient teachers who feel sufficiently confident to improvise as the lesson is already in progress. For example, they can rephrase an activity instruction, re-word certain items, simplify parts, replace cultural elements, explain new ideas or unfamiliar language and even change the activity type. The rationale behind such spontaneous modifications is fairly simple: they are driven by sheer necessity to get the lesson going smoothly and to find a way around what seems to be blocking or impeding the learning process.

The proposed activity modification matrix is meant for the planning process in which there is an opportunity to think over the suggested options for differentiation focus which could be teaching materials or learning activity or grouping options or level of support or learning outcomes. The suggested differentiated strategy is to use average group level textbook so that the selected textbook activities and tasks will hopefully be relevant and suitable and manageable for the biggest number of average achievers in the group. So, there will typically be a need for two modifications: one for low achievers to help and support them, and the other one for high achievers to keep them involved and engaged in the language learning process. The reason behind modifying activities for low achievers is to enable them catch up with the rest of the group, while the reason behind modifying activities for high achievers is to challenge them with an unusual task format or with linguistic creativity. Despite the reasons behind activity modifications being different for low and high achievers, the teaching agenda is the same for all students: to ensure that every student in the group is making progress along the course to the best of their ability, is engaged, involved

and is progressing in a group mode. The proposed activity modification matrix offers ideas and suggestions for easifying or simplifying activities for weaker students and for increasing the level of complexity and the level of challenge for better-prepared students.

Previous DI research findings indicate that teachers appear to implement more frequently those single DI practices that require less preparation. One possible explanation could be related to the high workload that teachers face worldwide, and therefore, lack the time to plan and prepare for DI, as well as modify tasks. On the other hand, teachers report feeling unprepared to differentiate classroom instruction as a mean to appropriately address student diversity. Without the proper training, teachers are unable to provide meaningful and successful instruction for all students, as they do not count with the knowledge on DI, and in the case of beginning teachers, the experience to teach diverse learners. It is then necessary and urgent that DI receives sufficient attention in pre-service education and further in-service teacher training and development.

Conclusions

The proposed activity or task modification matrix is meant to be of use and help to university English language teachers working with heterogeneous groups of English language learners and yet are seriously committed to all-inclusive teaching with no student left behind. The paradox is that while in a Russian non-linguistic university language course differentiation is most needed, the research – theoretical and experimental – of differentiated instruction at tertiary level is scarce in this country. Any meaningful changes in higher education language education should be research-driven and evidence-based, thus, there is a need to investigate current EAP and ESP teaching practices in Russian higher education, university stakeholder – university management, employers, faculty and students

- expectations and concerns and the impact of differentiation implementation upon the English language learning outcomes.

Meanwhile, differentiation is solely university English language teachers' ambition driven by the desire to achieve desirable teaching outcomes and to make their English language teaching efficient. Differentiated instruction implementation at tertiary level language education cannot be carried out single-handedly, it can only be implemented through a systemic united effort at institutional level or meso level. Currently, it is being introduced at individual English language teachers level, or micro level, driven by their enthusiasm and professional ambition. What does differentiation currently mean for university English language teachers? Modifying tasks and activities mean a lot more laborious lesson planning and lesson preparation with very little or no university support. Classroom management of two or three activity modifications requires more flexibility, sensitivity, diversity and a wider range of teacher roles. Finally, activity or task modification asks for introducing ipsative assessment of students' progress and student-oriented feedback. This is a tall order. It is clear that university English language teachers require a skill set for effective activity modification and need to acquire these skills through their pre-service teacher education institutions and improve them with experience and reflective practice.

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