Classroom strategies and tools for Differentiating Instruction in the ESL Classroom

Anne Dahlman
Patricia Hoffman
Susan Brauhn

ABSTRACT

Differentiated Instruction is a relatively widely used instructional approach across instructional contexts. It has proven to be successful in the general education context where studies have found that students exposed to Differentiated Instruction strategies consistently outperform other students (Tomlinson, 2001). Yet, there is a huge gap in professional literature that addresses the use of Differentiated Instruction in the ESL context. It is the aim of this paper to provide the reader with practical Differentiated Instruction strategies and tools for the use in the ESL classroom as well as the mainstream classroom with ELLs. We suggest three steps in implementing Differentiated Instruction, a) beginning with ensuring high quality curriculum that clearly articulates meaningful learning outcomes, both language and content, without which differentiation is not possible, b) moving onto carefully understanding student needs, their readiness, interests and learning profiles, based on systematic pre- and formative assessment, and finally c) implementing effective Differentiated Instruction strategies in the classroom to maximize the learning of all students. We provide multiple examples and useful tools to clarify each of the three steps.

Introduction

Differentiated Instruction has captured the attention of many educators across the country as they work to ensure that all children will progress toward the requirements of No Child Left Behind legislation. Differentiated Instruction allows classroom teachers to become more adept at planning instruction that is meaningful to every child in their classroom regardless of readiness level. Yet, content classes are not the only place where differentiation of instruction can be a valuable tool. ESL classrooms are often just as diverse as their classroom counterparts. Additionally, ESL teachers may not be fully aware of the mainstream curricular needs of their students. Whether working in collaborative consultation with mainstream teachers or in pull-out ESL programs, the benefits of Differentiated Instruction for ESL teachers and ELLs is worth considering.

The primary audience for this paper is ESL teachers who are dealing with mixed ability classes and who may not realize that Differentiated Instruction is as important in their classroom as in the mainstream classroom. However, much of what we are proposing is also for mainstream classroom teachers who may not understand the unique needs of their English language learners (ELLs).

Unlike the individualized instruction of the 1970's, Differentiated Instruction is not an attempt at having individualized lesson plans for every student. However, it is a systematic way of maximizing learning that is both rigorous in addressing high standards for all students yet personalized to reflect individual learner characteristics and needs. Snow (2000) states that ESL teachers have the unique responsibility of not only addressing core knowledge and skills but also to develop the language and literacy skills of a culturally and linguistically diverse group of students who also have wide differences in their experiential and educational backgrounds. We strongly advocate the responsibility of the ESL teachers to serve as the language professionals who, based on carefully consideration of the language and content curricula and student needs, are able to guide ELLs in their dual process of acquiring English as fast and effectively as possible and gaining in content knowledge and skills to reach the highest learning outcomes possible.

At first glance referring to standards and differentiation in the same sentence might appear to be an oxymoron. But standards provide the framework on which to create differentiated instruction (Boyd-Batstone, 2006, p.2). Standards guide us in making decisions about "what" to teach, while Differentiated Instruction gives us the mindset and tools for "how" to teach successfully. Differentiated Instruction begins with the philosophy that all children can learn but will do so at different rates and along different paths of interest. What works well for one child, may cause another to struggle or lose interest.

At its most basic level, Differentiated Instruction means "shaking up" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 1) what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information (differing learning styles and interests), making sense of ideas (varying cognitive processing needs, ranging from pacing to levels of abstraction), and expressing what they learn (multiple choices for assessment tasks). When thinking about differentiating content to be learned, Tomlinson (1999) explains that first a teacher will need to make decisions about the essential content, principles and skills that *all* students will master, but at the same time understands student differences and provides opportunities for advanced learners to also work on more complex ideas or problems.

The key is to focus on the big ideas and concepts of the curriculum for all students and differentiate how each child will gain access to them and be evaluated. By providing only one type of activity, for example, to practice a certain skill or body of knowledge will leave behind all of those students whose preferred learning style or interests are not being tapped by the chosen activity.

Schools need to reexamine this whole issue of coverage; so many of the students who are struggling in school have good ideas and are good at critical thinking, but they may not be quite as good with taking in and retaining information. Because of the differences between students' optimal conditions (physical or mental) for learning new information, such as pacing, degree of structure of task, tolerance for ambiguity or physical conditions such as noise level or body movement, students are often not allowed to process new information in an effective manner. Assignments and tests ought to be

more flexible so that different kinds of minds can be effective. We allow this all the time in the adult world (Scherer, 2006); this is exhibited in the fact that individuals typically gravitate toward careers that suit their aptitudes, learning and personality preferences; some get into occupations requiring more practical and hands-on skills, while others choose a career where they can use their creativity and problem-solving. In schools, students who are analytic learners often get adequately served, while students with practical and/or creative mindsets and tendencies are commonly ignored.

Once the principles of differentiated instruction are understood, they can be adjusted for the interests and readiness of English language learners in both mainstream and ESL classrooms. The first principle is that assessment and instruction are intimately linked in a continuous feedback loop. Areas of assessment should focus on concepts or content, critical thinking, and skills or processes to help the teacher(s) judge the learner's mastery. An ESL teacher can be particularly helpful to classroom teachers in understanding particular ELLs strengths and weaknesses which may go undetected in a larger classroom setting. Ultimately, if the achievement gap is to be closed it will be necessary to diagnose (assess) discrete skills and knowledge individual learners have not mastered and plan how to effectively teach or reteach through relevant and appropriate curriculum and instructional strategies.

Both ESL and classroom teachers can differentiate the content (*what* they teach), process (*how* they teach) or product (what they use as *evidence* of learning). They can do so taking into account various students' readiness (what the student already knows), interests, or learning profile (the student's preferred mode of learning). It is important to note at this point that applying Differentiated Instruction strategies is a matter of degree and we highly recommend that the readers begin small. The principles of Differentiated Instruction reflect the very best practice of teaching; what makes this approach unique is the fact that its effectiveness lies in the fact that the principles are carried out proactively and systematically, with great thought. This means that beginning with applying even just small steps into one's practice with this systematic and meaningful approach will yield great gains in instruction. In the following, we will focus on three steps of differentiating instruction in the ESL classroom, accompanied by multiple examples and practical tools for carrying out those steps in any classroom. The three steps are: 1. Identifying meaningful goals, 2. Monitoring student learning, and 3. Creating meaningful activities for the Differentiated Instruction classroom.

This article is designed to be a "how-to" guide for beginning to implement these three principles of Differentiated Instruction. We recommend that this paper be read with a pen and paper at hand and they be used for taking notes about the feasibility in and relevance of the principles presented to one's own teaching context. Also, we encourage that the readers draft an action plan for implementing Differentiated Instruction in their context while studying these principles by jotting down the first concrete steps of differentiating instruction that one plans to take in the near future. Again, begin small!

1. **Knowing exactly what to teach: Identifying meaningful goals and objectives (KUDs)**

The main premise of Differentiated Instruction is that it begins with a clearly articulated, quality curriculum. We cannot differentiate content that is vague, ill-defined or not directly related to students' academic and social learning needs outside the ESL classroom (Tomlinson, 2001; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). ESL programs that are successful allot effort and resources to carefully evaluate their curriculum across both mainstream content courses as well as in ESL coursework to identify overlap, gaps, and to ensure that the curriculum directly addresses the needs of the learners. This articulation must go beyond basic proficiency levels, listening, speaking, reading and writing to include distinct knowledge, skills and dispositions that will be addressed at each level of proficiency and align with a district's general education standards and curriculum.

Decisions related to ESL curriculum are challenging given the varied needs of learners, the limits to the availability of resources, minimal time in the school day to work with colleagues on curriculum mapping, and the lack of information about options available and the high cost associated with purchasing a commercial curriculum (Hoffman & Dahlman, 2007). Here we focus mainly on decisions made after a program has adopted a curriculum, on the unit- and lesson-level decisions an ESL teacher makes about what to focus on in a given instructional unit or lesson. It is clear from research and our work from the field alike that what distinguishes successful ESL teachers from others are the following features related to this decision-making about what to teach (e.g., Echevarria, J., Voft, M. E., & Short, 2007; Met, 1994):

1. The teacher is superbly clear on both short term and long term learning goals and objectives and everything that is done in a lesson is directly linked to support these learning goals and objectives.

2. The teacher <u>shares</u> these learning goals and objectives with students so that the students are also clear on the learning goals and objectives and can self-monitor their progress.

3. These goals are created based on:
    a) ESL language and content-area standards (e.g., Language Arts, Science, Math, etc.),
    b) a pre-assessment of learner skills and prior knowledge (which might vary from learner to learner)
    c) an exploration of learning needs (language and content) beyond the ESL classroom (e.g., by looking at district curriculum, content standards, and materials in content-area classrooms, consulting with other teachers, etc.)

4. The teacher <u>prioritizes</u> among various learning goals and objectives to identify those that serve as foundational knowledge and skills, yield wide-ranging results and address the biggest obstacles of learning for students.

One of the main challenges that ESL teachers face when identifying meaningful goals and objectives is going beyond identifying language skills, such as speaking, listening, reading and writing. Too often, ESL lessons *merely* focus on surface level language skills and allot too little attention to promoting students' critical thinking and deeper

understandings of language and language learning. We cannot emphasize enough how important these deeper level understandings are in reaching all students; they serve as a bridge between what we want student to learn, namely knowledge (e.g., rules, definitions, vocabulary) and skills (e.g. speaking, listening, reading and writing, thinking and learning strategies, usage of appropriate vocabulary), and students' motivation, feelings and personal ideas about language learning. If this link between knowledge/ skills and motivation/feelings does not exist, little meaningful and sustained language learning will occur.

Thus, meaningful language goals and objectives, those that will be relevant and useful to students consist of the following three types (Tomlinson, 2001):

KUD-Objectives:
§ **K**NOW (facts, dates, definitions, people, places)
§ **U**NDERSTAND ("I want students to understand that…")
§ **D**O (specific skills, start with a verb, NOT a classroom activity)

Table 1 illustrates generic sample components under each of the KUD categories from the ESL context.

Table 1. Sample KUDs from the ESL context

"I want students to…"

Know	Understand that …	Do
§ Facts and information related to academic content. § Key vocabulary related to topic (list). § Key language (forms and functions) related to content (list). § Learning strategies helpful in acquiring language and content (list). § Features of style/register.	§ Good language learners use strategies to help them make sense of unfamiliar content. § In a school context, we use words and structures that reflect the style of academic communication. § Being a proficient reader means that one is able to read fluently and comprehend the meanings of the text (both literal and inferred).	§ Use appropriate vocabulary, language forms and register to express academic language functions related to content. (list) § Use learning strategies (list) to achieve the skills listed above.

The "Know"-category contains learning goals and objectives that target facts and pieces of knowledge. This category can be understood as declarative knowledge, which refers to knowledge that we can name and describe. For example, we ask students to tell us what they know about the past tense or about a certain content topic (e.g., rain forests), have students give us language rules related to when usage of a certain type of word is appropriate in a specific context or test them on vocabulary items.

The "Do"-category includes items that target procedural knowledge, i.e., when students actually *use* their knowledge of language in an authentic context. The challenge with creating meaningful "Do"-objectives stem from a number of factors:

> 1.   Ensuring consistent opportunities for authentic contexts for practice and assessment.
> 2.   Identifying *key* skills that are assessable and that yield the most significant improvement.
> 3.   Consistently assessing and having students self-assess their own skill development.
> 4.   Providing meaningful feedback to learners about skills (see section on Assessment for discussion on feedback).

The category that is rarely incorporated in ESL lessons and that is at the heart of Differentiated Instruction is "Understand". This category refers to what Wiggins and McTighe (2005) call enduring understandings or essential questions. These are ideas that connect the material to be taught with students' prior knowledge, and perspectives; their realities and backgrounds. This helps us deal with the "So what"-response students often have about learning certain topics and skills. The following questions aim to capture the essence of what is meant by understanding:

> §   What is it that we want our students to remember and *understand* about language learning five years from now?
> §   What is it in the topic that is deeply meaningful for the learner, beyond the classroom or school?
> §   What do we want to convey to our students about what they need to be able to do with language to succeed in the regular classroom?
> §   What do good language learners do?
> §   Why do we study grammar?
> §   What is unique about the language of school?
> §   What does it mean to be proficient in a language?

The sample understandings in Table 1 have been designed to address *critical* understandings about successful language learning and to provide meaningful explanations for how language is used. "Understand"-items can also be thought of as the ideas that we as the teacher want our students to have in their minds when they are learning about and using language. These ideas are meaningful, and they aim to help students understand and motivate them.   For differentiating instruction, it is crucial that we incorporate all three kinds of goals and objectives. We cannot differentiate just

knowledge ("Know) or knowledge and skills ("Do"); we need all three types of goals and objectives so that we can successfully differentiate instruction.

To help our understanding of the KUD-objectives in the ESL context, let us look at an example set of KUD objectives in Table 2. These are unit goals that an ESL teacher created for a 4th grade Sheltered Science unit on magnets.

Table 2. Sample KUDs: 4th Grade Sheltered Science

"I want students to…"

Know	**Understand that …**	**Do**
§ The seven key concepts of magnets. § How to conduct a science experiment. § Key vocabulary (Content Obligatory): magnet, magnetic field, repel vs. attract, force, north pole vs. south pole. § Key language (Content Obligatory): language used to predict, analyze/ explain and synthesize. § Learning strategies: note taking, using resources.	§ Magnets affect us in many ways in our daily lives. § The scientific method involves processes such as observation, prediction, data collection, analysis, drawing conclusions and evaluation. § Good language learners use their background knowledge about a new topic. § Learning grammar forms that relate to prediction, explanation and synthesis allows us to be specific about reporting on our experiment.	§ Use key (and expanded) vocabulary and language to communicate about content. § Use identified learning strategies to maximize learning about content.

We would like to make a couple of points here about the items under the categories in the teacher's table. First, goals and objectives that begin with "how to…" (e.g., how to conduct a science experiment) are always "Know"-objectives because "how to…" implies that students are expected to know (and possibly describe and/or explain) how to conduct a science experiment but not actually conduct the experiment. Only when students are asked to actually carry out the skill, e.g., conduct a science experiment, is this objective or goal a "Do"-objective.

Second, as we can see in the table, the "Understand"-objectives are always articulated as a full sentence beginning with "I want students to understand **that**…." This is important because only by writing out a full "that"-clause we can tap into a deep understanding we would like our students to acquire. If we list separate ideas that are not expressed in full clauses, these goals or objectives turn into "Know"-objectives.

Third, as this teacher demonstrates in an effective way, the objectives listed in the table contain both *significant* language AND content objectives. The only way for ESL teachers to assist their students in successful second language acquisition and academic learning in school is to carefully plan and implement lessons, whatever the ESL teaching context, that are focused on teaching and learning substantive language components that are directly embedded in rich academic content that requires the effective use of higher level thinking and learning strategies.

The last and possibly the most important point about quality curriculum and learning goals and objectives that we would like to make is that when differentiating instruction, we do NOT differentiate learning goals. The notion that we shoot for the middle and then differentiate up and down is misinformed. What the philosophy behind Differentiated Instruction advocates is setting high goals and standards for ALL learners. The differentiation comes into play when we provide varying levels of scaffolding to students with varying needs so that they all can work toward the same high goals. This scaffolding might include varied use of materials (differentiating content), classroom activities (differentiating process) or assessment tasks (differentiating product), but all students are working toward the same essential learner outcomes (key components) expressed in the goals.

2.   Knowing exactly what our students need: Assessing student readiness, interest and learning profile

In addition to ensuring the richness and meaningfulness of the curriculum, another key principle of Differentiated Instruction is its focus on effective assessment. The same way that we cannot differentiate curriculum that is not well-defined, we cannot differentiate instruction that is not directly based on the careful identification of learner outcomes that correlate with the needs of the learners. Experienced teachers develop good instincts about what is best for their students and make decisions based on these instincts, adjusting these decisions through observation and reflection. Differentiated Instruction offers tools for teachers to "refine" these good instincts (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 45) and maximizes teachers' confidence in making thoughtful decisions about student learning experiences.

Formative assessment

A key Differentiated Instruction tool used for better understanding student needs is the use of formative assessment. It emphasizes the importance of focusing on understanding and improving student learning instead of merely measuring student learning (Wiggins, 2004). Thus, we should concentrate on designing tasks that provide

us with meaningful data about all aspects of their learning (readiness, interest, and learning profile), and not limit ourselves by solely thinking about effective assessment as the degree of mastery in a final, formal evaluation. It is this notion of meaningful assessment, i.e., collecting meaningful data consistently throughout the learning process that reveals a holistic picture of the learner (including affective variables) that is at the heart of Differentiated Instruction. Formative assessment does not focus on ranking students or comparing them but rather on developing an understanding of students within the context of the students' own backgrounds.

This diagnostic prescriptive mode of teaching identifies the gaps between what students currently know and what they will need to know for a final assessment. This is especially important for ELLs who may not have been exposed to large amounts of a district's curriculum. It includes any or all of the following: pre-assessment activities, ongoing informal assessments, observation, checklists, student reflection and self-assessments, exit slips and collaborative analysis of student work. All of these provide information to the teacher to fine-tune instructional opportunities prior to the final formal summative assessments. The importance of formative assessment lies in the fact that "diagnostic thinking gives teachers information that will help them think about timing, materials, depth of thinking, and methods on the upcoming unit" (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2004, p. 10).

Formative assessment begins with pre-assessment, and occurs on an ongoing basis throughout the unit and ends with a culminating authentic task (summative evaluation) that is used to measure student learning in relation to the carefully drafted learning goals and objectives.

Feedback and guidance

Feedback plays a key role in formative assessment. The feedback received from formative assessment is shared with all stakeholders and used (optimally by all stakeholders) to inform future teaching practice. In essence, assessment becomes a roadmap that drives instruction. Assessment information helps the teacher map next steps for varied learners and the class as a whole. For the student, this feedback is crucial in understanding the desired outcomes (behaviors and knowledge) that are the components of successful learning. In addition, formative assessment and the feedback stemming from it offer opportunities for the learner to self-assess and self-regulate effectively (Wiggins, 2004).

The notion of feedback is part of the act of communication between the instructor and the learner, which plays a crucial role in learning. Communicating feedback effectively to the learner is a special pedagogic skill that needs to be practiced in order to be mastered. This skill is called guidance. Wiggins (2004) emphasizes that the learner needs both feedback and guidance to be able to learn effectively. He describes this important distinction between feedback, guidance and evaluation in the following:

"Feedback is information about what happened, the result or effect of our actions. The environment or other people "feed back" to us the impact of our behavior, be that upshot intended or unintended. Guidance, on the other hand, gives future direction: what should I do, in light of what just happened? And evaluation, finally, judges my overall performance against a standard. Feedback tells me whether I am on course. Guidance tells me the most likely ways to achieve my goal. Evaluation tells me whether I am or
have been sufficiently on course to be deemed competent or successful."

Pre-assessment

Pre-assessment takes place in the beginning of the school year, a semester or an instructional unit. It serves as the first step in the formative assessment process. Pre-assessment plays an integral role in successfully differentiating our classroom. First, pre-assessment allows the teacher opportunities to truly understand his or her students, their strengths and weaknesses, interests and backgrounds and the differences between students in these areas. Second, the data gathered from pre-assessments, together with formative and summative assessments, will directly inform the teacher in making meaningful decisions about classroom materials (content), activities (process) and end-of-the unit assessments (product). The key benefit of conducting systematic and meaningful pre-assessments is that they enable the teacher to become more *purposeful* about grouping students during class, in assigning materials and designing classroom activities by using data s/he has gathered about students' strengths and weaknesses in regard to the content to be studied. In the following, we will describe ways that pre-assessment can be carried out to find out students' readiness, interests and learning profiles in the ESL classroom.

Assessing readiness, interest and learning profile

Tomlinson (2001) has identified three characteristics of students that are the basis for our differentiation in the classroom. These three categories represent the factors that make our students different from one another and that should be carefully considered when planning and implementing instruction. In the following, we will take a look at these components, readiness, interest and learning profile, as they relate specifically to the ESL context.

Readiness

Readiness has to do with a student's current level of knowledge, understandings and skills related to a specific unit of study. The defined learning goals and objectives (see Tables 1 and 2) determine what components of readiness have been identified as the areas of focus for a given instructional unit. During the pre-assessment of readiness, the teacher will gain important information about students' varying levels of mastery in the knowledge, understandings and skills related to the content to be studied (i.e., the

set learning goals). This information will enable the teacher to design focused learning experiences for students as well as appropriate methods of scaffolding.

What exactly are we assessing when we assess readiness in the ESL classroom during pre-assessment? Table 3 describes some sample categories that the notion of readiness refers to in the ESL classroom. The main principle is that readiness refers to language and content as well as cognitive processes and learning strategies. Also, in the ESL context, cultural competence is also one of the key readiness categories. Note that each of the items can denote either knowledge-, understanding-, or skill/do-level objectives based on how they are articulated.

Table 3. Sample Components of Readiness in the ESL Classroom

Language	§ Communication: Interpretive, interpersonal and presentational skills § Skills: Reading, writing, listening and speaking skills § Fluency/Accuracy § Vocabulary, Forms, Functions
Academic Content	§ Key understandings of content § Key knowledge of content § Key skills in content area
Learning Strategies [1]	§ General Language Learning Strategies § Aural and Oral Strategies § Reading and Writing Strategies
Cognitive Processes	§ Categories in Equalizer: need for structure; processing pace; concrete vs. abstract; number of factors, etc. (Tomlinson, 2001) § Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Processes
Social/Cultural competencies	§ Pragmatic knowledge § Register § Cultural conventions § Practices, products

Certainly, none of the factors listed in Table 3 are new to ESL teachers. The contribution that Differentiated Instruction makes is that it encourages us to be systematic about identifying, assessing and teaching the factors involved in readiness as well as make informed decisions about prioritizing instructional content to carefully align students' readiness in the above categories with the learning experiences that are of *most* benefit to students as they work toward the learning goals and objectives.

Examples of quick ways to conduct pre-assessments of readiness include:
· Language and content area tests (provided by publisher or school, e.g., MAP test)
· Anticipation Guide (true/false statements about content or language)

·   Confidence Scale (statements with rankings about how confident students feel about certain skills or content areas)

·   Entry Cards/Exit Cards (contain quick prompts to tap into skills and knowledge)

·   KWL

·   1-minute papers/Quick-writes

·   Graphic Organizers

·   Yes/No Cards (students respond with either Yes of No card to teacher's verbal prompts)

·   Teacher Observation/Checklist

·   3-2-1 Cards (e.g., three things you know, two questions you have, one thing you'd really like to learn…)

·   Journal

·   Write 10 facts about…

Interest

In addition to assessing readiness, as part of Differentiated Instruction, we assess student interests. Again, we do this to better match instruction with students, in this case with their interests. Assessing student interests is carried out in a more systematic way, and, importantly, the information received from the assessments is used to designing learning experiences that are relevant to students and perhaps to engage them more fully in learning and thus to increase the chance of reaching their potential.

Table 4 describes sample components related to interest that have an effect on students' engagement in the learning content and tasks in the ESL classroom.

Table 4. Sample Features of Student Interest in the ESL Classroom

In general	§ Areas of passion
	§ Interests within home vs. target culture
	§ What are students reading?
	§ What are their activities after school?
	§ What do they like?
	§ What are they interested in?
	§ What are their special talents?
In regard to school	§ Favorite subject/s
	§ Favorite teacher/s
	§ Favorite school functions (sports, arts, music)
Content area/Topic	§ Interests within a content area, e.g., science, math, social studies, physical education, etc..

ESL	§ Interests within a topic (e.g., eco systems, WW2, etc.)
	§ Interests in language (reading, writing…).
	§ Interests in language use situations (giving a speech, writing a journal entry, etc.)
	§ Favorite books.
	§ Favorite language learning activities.

A great, often unintentional, benefit of assessing student interest is that it sends the learner a message that the teacher is genuinely interested in the learner and his/her interests. Naturally, we cannot incorporate each and every interest of our students into our classroom activities, but strategically including some of them can make a significant difference in learning outcomes. Some of these strategic decisions might involve the following:

§   Integrating the interest area of a reluctant learner.

§   Integrating an interest area that is shared by many learners.

§   Integrating an interest area especially when the concepts and skills to be learned are difficult.

§   Identifying interest areas across student group and clustering students based on these.

§   Building in choice by using interest areas to increase motivation and engagement.

Some quick ways to find out about student interests are the following:

·   Interest Surveys (many available on the Internet)

·   Teacher Observation/Checklist

·   Peer Interviews

·   Brainstorm/webs

·   Questionnaires (select topics of interest)

·   Conversations/dialogue

·   Discussions

·   Journals

·   Provide choices for activities and materials

Learning Profile

In addition to readiness and interests, a third characteristic that makes our students unique is learning profile. Learning profile refers to how students learn the best. Students' learning is affected by a) their preferred learning style and b) their backgrounds. Learning style includes such factors as:

·   Visual/auditory, tactile, or kinesthetic

·   Analytic/practical/creative

·   Multiple intelligences

·   Grouping preferences (i.e., individual, small group, or large group)

· Learning environment preferences (i.e., lots of space or a quiet area to work)

In an ESL context, we often focus so hard on students' language learning needs, in other words *what* they need to learn, that we don't pay sufficient attention to their learning styles, the factors related to *how* they learn best.

Student background is an especially important factor in the ESL context. Some of the student issues related to student background that have a significant effect on student learning in the ESL context are the following:

· Cultural Background ("who they are as people beyond ethnic and racial categories")
· Amount and quality of exposure to the English language and mainstream culture outside of schools
· Amount of/Feelings toward home culture vs. school culture
· Affect toward school, language and culture
· Stage of acculturation
· Questions re: identity
· Status of first language
· Experiences with school culture/language
· Features of interaction with peers
· Family factors

Again, it is important that a teacher prioritize when collecting information about student backgrounds. What is it that is most critical for the teacher to know and take into consideration in regard to student background when designing instruction? Some sample background factors that ESL teachers often present thinking about unique student needs:

· A student's lack of exposure to academic English outside of school
· A student's background as limited formal schooling
· A student who assumes the responsibility of tending to younger siblings at home
· An undocumented student
· A student who does not share a language of his/her parents

What can a teacher do upon discovering these, often complex and yet so significant, background factors of his/her students? Our advice in our work with many schools and school districts is to build connections and channels for communication between individuals within a school or district, or with other districts dealing with similar student characteristics or profiles. The connections can be created through Professional Learning Communities within schools/districts, site visits to other schools or districts, contacts with the ELL division of the Department of Education or professional gatherings, such as workshops and conferences.

3. Designing Differentiated Strategies: What do we do with pre-assessment data?

There are several reasons teachers must gather pre-assessment data prior to differentiating instruction. The teacher must be aware of the students' readiness, interests and learning profiles, all of which may either enhance or hinder student learning. Armed with this information the teacher will plan meaningful activities and group students in a variety of ways to capitalize on all students' knowledge, abilities and interests. The key here is for the teacher to be very selective when analyzing pre-assessment data; the teacher's task is to identify students' strengths and their most significant learning blocks and differentiate instruction by supporting students' in their greatest weaknesses and drawing from their biggest areas of strength. Upon identifying the most critical characteristics of students, the teacher will design a learning environment that will maximize student learning by increasing time for meaningful and relevant time on task.

What are the best instructional strategies to use in the Differentiated Instruction classroom? There's nothing inherently good or bad about instructional strategies. They are in essence the "buckets" teachers can use to deliver content (materials), process (activities) or products (assessments). Yet some "buckets" are better suited to achieving one type of goal more than another. The "buckets" can be used artfully or clumsily as part of well-conceived or poorly conceived lesson plans and delivery. In addition, virtually all "buckets" can be used in ways that ignore student learning differences, or they can become part of a larger system that appropriately responds to these differences (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 61). In the following, we will describe strategies that one often sees utilized in a classroom where the teacher is successfully differentiating instruction for his/her students. Again, we want to emphasize that one should begin implementing Differentiated Instruction with small, manageable and consistently applied steps.

Classroom Routines

Classroom routines are essential in a differentiated classroom because multiple transitions can be confusing or distracting particularly for ELLs. Routines help both the teacher and student focus as well as understand mutual expectations and responsibilities. Classroom instruction will often begin with large group instruction that focuses on the day's goals as well as the essential learner outcomes for the unit of instruction. There will usually be time for small group as well as paired or individual practice. Learners who satisfactorily complete tasks may be able to spend time on anchor activities that might include ongoing assignments or long range projects of interest to the student that can be worked on independently throughout a unit, grading period or longer and that assist students in moving independently from one assignment to another without needing teacher direction. Important routines will include:
- § Classroom agreements
- § Classroom cues
- § Home base seating
- § Moving into groups

- §   Materials distribution and turn in
- §   Anchor activities
- §   Opening activities
- §   Exit activities

Establishing classroom routines allows the teacher time to gather formative assessment data, for example during an opening activity (questions about studied material) or at end of the lesson, through an exit activity (students need to answer a question or do task as their ticket out the door). In addition, classroom routines build in predictability and structure, which are essential in creating a constructive Differentiated Instruction environment. Even though Differentiated Instruction involves varied tasks and multiple group formats, it is NEVER a chaotic or unorganized setting. It is exactly due to the multiple flexible variables of the Differentiated Instruction context that the classroom routines become so crucial.

Furthermore, Differentiated Instruction is all about independent learners. By setting clear classroom routines, we can facilitate students' independent working habits and assist them in assuming an increasing share of responsibility for their own learning.

Flexible Grouping

A classroom where differentiated instruction is being implemented may, at first glance, appear to be noisy and very active. However, closer observation will reveal a well-planned orchestration of instruction that flows meaningfully from one activity to the next. There will be cycles of large group, small group, paired and individual tasks and learning opportunities. This will fit within the framework of routines and expectations that guide the entire classroom.

> A differentiated classroom is marked by a repeated rhythm of whole-class preparation, review, and sharing, followed by opportunity for individual or small-group exploration, sense-making, extension, and production (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 6).

As we pointed out earlier, Differentiated Instruction does not attempt to address each student's every need during every single class period. Instead, it is the aim that through flexible grouping we can meet the needs of many learners and over time will teach to students' strengths as well as assist students in performing better in their areas of weakness. The basis for grouping varies between responding to student readiness, interest, or learning style. Sometimes the groups are teacher-selected and heterogeneous or homogeneous, based on readiness level or interest. Sometimes students select their own work groups; sometimes they are randomly assigned.

A useful tool for making purposeful decisions about how to group students is TAPS, an acronym used to refer to four different options for groupings: Total group (T), alone (A), in partners (P), and in small groups (S). Table 5 illustrates the features of each of these groupings as well as provides suggestions for situations that lend themselves especially appropriately for utilizing each.

Table 5. TAPS Grouping Options and their Uses (Modified from Gregory & Kuzmich 2004, p. 125)

GROUPING STRATEGY	Works well for these strategies
TOTAL Whole class instruction	Presenting new information Pre-assessment Modeling new skills Videos, guest speakers, presentations, demonstrations
ALONE Students work on a variety of tasks based on readiness or interest	Pre-assessment Self assessment Reflection Journaling Projects/independent study Individual reading Note taking; summarizing; study skills Practice and mastery of skills
PAIRED Students work with a partner based on based on task or interest	Brainstorming Think, pair, share Checking for understanding; processing of information Checking homework or daily work Peer editing; peer evaluation Researching Planning Practice and mastery of skills
SMALL GROUPS Homogeneous for skill development-based on readiness	Practice and mastery of skills Re-teaching (with teacher while other classmates practice skills) Reading partners
SMALL GROUPS Heterogeneous for cooperative groups based on task or interest	Brainstorming Problem solving Interest centers Cooperative learning assignments Group investigation

In a differentiated classroom, students belong to more than one instructional group during a unit, and these groups will change over time based on informal assessment and learner needs. It is this latter point that is of utmost importance in Differentiated Instruction; namely, it is the fact that membership in a group remains flexible. This distinguishes flexible groups based on readiness from ability groups that are less responsive to ever-changing student needs. A true flexible group responds to a wide

range of learner characteristics, related to readiness, interest and learning profile and allows ongoing adjustments to group assignments based on formative assessment.

A question we often get from teachers is whether or not we should assign students to homogeneous groups. Frequently ESL teachers try to group students with similar needs together. While this is important for some instructional tasks, it is neither practical nor desirable for all instruction. Using cooperative learning groups where tasks, such as a jigsaw activity, are differentiated by complexity and quantity (categories of readiness), all students will engage in meaningful learning as well as contribute to the success of the group. When students read different materials, each of them is able to provide information that is essential to the overall group understanding. A cooperative learning task is the optimal tool for making use of the unique backgrounds of students, beyond readiness:

> Certainly it's easier to put students achieving at an advanced level in the same cooperative group and give them more challenging material. With homogeneity, however, we lose the potential to harness students' diverse intelligences and perspectives to create a synergistic learning experience where the sum is greater than any of its parts (Schneidewind & Davidson, 2000, p. 24).

A wonderful classroom routine regarding grouping that saves the teacher a great deal of time is using pre-assigned standing groups. These are groups that have previously determined membership and that serve various functions. The teacher simply directs the students to form one of these types of groups based on the nature of the task; some of the groups are mixed ability, some designed for generating ideas, others are mini groups for meeting with the teacher. The key to the usefulness of these groups lies in the fact that transitioning into groups will take very little time and that the consistency of the group members has been planned ahead of time to be optimal for the nature of the task. Table 6 describes some of the possible pre-assigned standing group options.

Table 6. Types of Pre-assigned Standing Groups (Adapted from Tomlinson, 2003)

Text Teams	**Think tanks**
Similar readiness	Mixed Readiness
Reading pairs	Idea Generator
	Groups of 4 or 5
Teacher talkers	**Dip sticks**
Groups of 5-7 with similar learning needs with whom the teacher will meet to extend and support growth	Groups of six with varied profiles used by teacher to do "dip stick", cross-section checks of progress, understanding
Peer Partners	**Synthesis squads**
Student selected	Sets of 4 with visual, performance,
Groups of 3 or 4	writing, metaphorical (etc., based on learning profile) preferences

Another example of a pre-assigned group is clock groups where students switch groups at regular intervals to serve as members of groups with varying functions and consistencies. For example, at ten o'clock a student might be part of a group assigned by interest or strength and working in pairs. Then at eleven o'clock this student might be working in a mixed ability quad and so on.

Tiered Activities

We know from brain research that learning occurs when students receive challenging but achievable goals (Caine & Caine, 1994). Also in the context of ESL, we know that students need comprehensible input, which is language input/material that is one level higher than the learners' current level of proficiency (Krashen, 1981). Tiered activities enable the teacher to create tasks that target students' varying levels of readiness and thus allow for the appropriate level of challenge for the learners.

The process of creating tiered activities entails creating assignments that target various components of readiness (see sample components in Table 3) at various levels of difficulty. For example, the ESL teacher who created the 4th grade Sheltered Science unit, designed tiered activities using Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive skills as the basis for differentiating for readiness (Table 7). In this case, the tasks vary in the degree of difficulty of thinking skills as well as by the complexity of the language load. These tasks address the variability in students' knowledge, understandings and skills related to the unit (see the unit goals targeting these competencies in Table 2).

Table 7. 4th Grade Sheltered Science Unit: Tiered Activities

Activities Based on Readiness
1. (Application) Construct a graph or chart using the data you've collected from these experiments.
2. (Analysis) Evaluate the relevancy of data. [Are you using a broad range of objects? Are the objects affected by something (plastic coating, wood, e.g.)?]
3. (Synthesis)
   a. Propose a plan for a new experiment using magnets.
   b. Conduct the experiment and record the data.
   c. Formulate a new scheme for classifying objects affected by magnets.
   d. Solve a common everyday problem by using the knowledge you have learned about magnets.
4. (Evaluation) Judge the logical consistency of the results of the experiments. Based on this information, what do you expect to happen with future experiments?

Flexibility is again the key in designing and implementing meaningful tiered assignments. By varying the focus of the task and the composition of groups, students

will be less likely to focus on who is in what group or working on which task at which level of difficulty. When *all* students work on meaningful tasks, students are less likely to complain about what other students are doing. Thus, it is important that the most basic-level task is as engaging and interesting as higher-level tasks. Table 8 illustrates the use of a combination of tasks that utilizes flexible grouping.

Table 8. 4th Grade Sheltered Instruction Unit: Flexible Grouping and Tiered Assignment

Task I: Learning Centers (individual, pairs, or small groups)

Four experiments:
- experiment 1: Floating magnets on pencil
- experiment 2: Suspended paperclip
- experiment 3: Tray of objects
- experiment 4: Marbles in water

Class Extension Activity (Tiered Assignment)

- **level 1:** pictures of nine objects in the classroom; put a check on the line by the objects that stick to a magnet.
- **level 2:** same as above, plus pick four of the objects above to write four complete sentences. e.g. A metal door handle sticks to the magnet. A pencil does not stick to the magnet.
- **level 3:**   write your predictions first before using your magnet on the nine objects; do the same as #2; draw a conclusion about your results

The nature of the activities you plan for students should reflect the amount of scaffolding they need to understand and complete a task. Students whose level of language and/or whose readiness is at a beginning level will need more concrete activities to support their learning. A guiding principal of Differentiated Instruction is "The Equalizer" which is described in detail on pages 120-124 in Tomlinson's (1999) work *The Differentiated Classroom*. She likens the planning process to the buttons on a stereo which would not provide a quality sound if every button was set to its full capacity. When several of the "buttons" are set higher, others should be adjusted lower.

Choices

One of the most effective strategies in the differentiated classroom is the use of choices. Giving students choices about materials, activities and assessments gives students a sense of empowerment and naturally increases students' motivation and engagement. Choices support differentiation in that they enable students to make selections about what mode to use for a task (e.g., visual, kinesthetic, or auditory) or what multiple intelligence preference to utilize in a given activity (e.g., musical, linguistic, etc.). One strategy that allows the learner choices about tasks, assessments or materials is the

learning menu. This is a simple list of "dishes" that students select from, including appetizers and desserts. The teacher can set certain conditions for picking items off the menu, such as "you need to have more than one item from the main dishes and only one of the desserts."

Students love having choices. Table 9 illustrates the effect of choices on learning processes, based on brain research.

Table 9. Choices in Learning (Modified from Jensen, 1998)

Choices	Vs.	Required
Content, process, product		No student choice
		Restricted resources
Use of groups, rich resources		Assigned work
Attention to affect		
Relevant	Vs.	Irrelevant
Meaningful		Impersonal
Connected to learner		Out of context
Deep understanding		Only to pass a test
Engaging	Vs.	Passive
Emotional		Low interaction
Energetic		External
Hands on		Lecture seatwork
Learner engagement		

Increased intrinsic Motivation   Increased apathy and resentment

Conclusion

It is important to remember that Differentiated Instruction is foremost a philosophy and not merely a collection of instructional tools. Without focusing on creating a supportive learning environment and truly believing in the potential of all of one's students, little improvement can be made. The aim of this paper was to share the main principles of Differentiated Instruction, as they relate to the ESL classroom and to equip the readers with several classroom strategies that will hopefully prove useful in implementing Differentiated Instruction in the classroom.

Implementing Differentiated Instruction can seem overwhelming at first, which is why it is important to "think big but begin small." Rather than try to revamp an entire curriculum, focus on one unit that has proven troublesome to students and that lends

itself to a variety of teaching strategies. Small successes will provide the encouragement to continue to provide your students with a variety of learning options. Most teachers already have the knowledge base for successful differentiation but have simply lacked a clear focus of how and where to begin. By starting with one area of your curriculum, your knowledge, confidence and repertoire of skills will grow over time and will be easily transferred to other curricular areas.

When there is a clear and meaningful focus for instruction, when the teacher is well aware of students' strengths and weaknesses, and subsequently when students are given the right tools for learning, in the form of interesting materials and tasks that support their preferred learning styles, learning turns into magic. Instead of struggling and being unmotivated, students turn into self-efficacious learners unleashing their natural quest for discovering and exploration.

REFERENCES

Boyd-Batstone, P. (2006). *Differentiated early literacy for English language learners: Practical strategies.* Boston, MA: Pearson, Allyn and Bacon.

Caine, R. and N. Caine (1994). *Making connections: Teaching and the human brain.* Somerset, NJ: Addison Wesley.

Echevarria, J., Voft, M. E., & Short, D. (2007). *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP® Model* (3rd Ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson, Allyn and Bacon.

Gregory, G. & Kuzmich, L. (2004). *Data driven differentiation in the Standards-based classroom*. Corwin Press.

Hoffman, P., & Dahlman, A. (2007). Making decisions about ESL curriculum. *MinneWITESOL Journal, 24*.

Jensen, E. (1998). *Teaching with the Brain in Mind.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Met, M. (1994). "Teaching Content Through a Second Language." In Genesee, F. (ed.) Educating Second Language Children: The Whole Child, the Whole Curriculum, the Whole Community. Cambridge University Press; pp. 159-167.

Scherer, M. (2006). Celebrate strengths, nurture affinities: A conversation with Mel

Levine. *Educational Leadership, 64*(1), 8-15.

Schneidewind, N. & Davidson, E. (2000). Differentiating cooperative learning. *Educational Leadership, 58*(1), 24-27.

Snow, M. (Ed.) (2000). *Implementing the ESL standards for pre-K-12 students through teacher education.* Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

Tomlinson, C. (2003). *Fulfilling the promise of the differentiated classroom: Strategies and tools for responsive teaching.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tomlinson, C. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms. 2nd ed.* Alexandria, VA. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, Merrill, Prentice-Hall.

Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design, 2nd ed.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Wiggins, G. (2004). Assessment as feedback. Retrieved on January 15, 2008 online at http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/assess/wiggins.htm.

[1] Full description of categories available at (http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning_Support/ English_Language_Learners/Standards/index.html)