

# Implementing Differentiated Instruction in EFL Junior High Schools: Obstacles and Challenges

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## Abstract

The present study aimed to examine the obstacles and challenges in practicing differentiated instruction, a pedagogical approach highly promoted by the Ministry of Education, Taiwan. This study addressed the issues from high school EFL teachers' perspectives. Based on the findings, a more feasible plan for differentiated instruction in EFL junior high schools was provided in the hope of enhancing students' learning in a mixed ability class.

## Keywords

differentiated instruction, teaching obstacles, qualitative research

## Introduction

In recent years, a revolution of education that recognizes and emphasizes students' individual differences has been under way in Taiwan. Differentiated instruction (DI) is one of the instructional approaches promoted in this wave of educational reform. Specifically, DI is one of the strategies to solve the difficulty of teaching high school English classes where a wide discrepancy in students' English proficiency is common.

## 1 Literature Review

Tomlinson (2001) defines differentiated instruction as offering multiple approaches to the teaching content, teaching procedures, and students' production.

### 1.1 Teaching Strategies and Effectiveness

Various strategies are used in DI to enhance its effectiveness. Flexible grouping and assigning various tasks are the commonly adopted strategies in DI. Some studies have revealed positive effects of these strategies on students' motivation, attitude, and achievements (Baumgartner, Lipowski, & Rush, 2003; Chuang,

Wang, & Wu, 2014; Liu, 2008).

On the other hand, some studies have reported no significant difference in learning achievements between young learners receiving differentiated instruction and those receiving single-method instruction (Johnson, 2010; Weng & Chien, 2015).

### 1.2 Problems Teachers Encountered

Several studies have pointed out difficulties of implementing DI in class. The most common problems teachers encountered in implementing DI include the tight school schedule, the problem of labeling students, the lack of supports, and the complexity involved in lesson preparation and assessments (Lin, Gao, & Hsu, 2016; Valiandes, 2015).

### 1.3 Research Questions

There have been few studies that explored what motivates teachers to implement DI and how they deal with the challenge of implementing DI. This study addressed these issues. The research questions were:

- (1) What motivates EFL junior high teachers to provide differentiated instruction?
- (2) What are the obstacles teachers meet in implementing differentiated instruction?
- (3) What are the effective strategies teachers use in differentiated instruction?

## 2 Methodology

Two junior high school EFL English teachers, who had experienced implementing DI, were invited to participate in the research, which lasted for 6 months. Data were collected from 36 semi-structured interviews, 125 classroom observations, and 24 copies of teaching materials. The observation form used in the classroom observations was adapted from Borich and Martin (2002). Content analysis was applied to

analyze the data with ATLAS.ti 8.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Motivation for Implementing DI

Teachers' beliefs and positive teaching experiences were found to motivate the participants to implement DI.

#### 3.2 Obstacles

Four major obstacles to using DI were found, including time limitation, the lack of colleagues' supports, the low effectiveness of delivering DI, and the problem of class management.

#### 3.3 Effective Strategies

Incorporating heterogeneous grouping, leveled and adaptive assignments and tasks, and technologies in DI were the effective strategies used by the participants.

### 4 Discussion

The results show that the participants mainly focused on "students' production" when implementing DI. Differentiated "teaching content" and "teaching procedures" were not seen in the class. The finding can be explained by two reasons. First, the teachers could not afford the massive working load of revising teaching content into different levels. Second, multi-level students stayed in the same classroom. The teachers were unable to give sufficient attention to students working on different tiered tasks at the same time.

To make adaptive teaching content and teaching procedures more feasible in DI, three pieces of advice were given: (1) form teacher community; (2) reorganize class size; (3) use technologies to record students' learning process and progress. First, by forming teacher community, teachers can prepare teaching materials collaboratively, and thus sharing the load of adapting teaching content for students with different levels. Second, by reorganizing the class into a smaller size, students can gain more attention and personal feedback from teachers during the teaching process. Third, integration of technologies (e.g. mobile devices) makes it easier for teachers to assign different tasks to different students and record students' production and progress.

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