

Supporting Kindergarten English Language Teachers through their Primary Journey in Differentiated Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the importance of differentiated instruction in a world where students of a wide variety meet. The educational system must equitably provide opportunities for challenged and challenging students to meet the same objectives through the use of different materials and approaches. Differentiated instruction (DI) is of four stages: (1) pre-assessing students for preferred learning style, interests, and entry levels, (2) planning for, (3) preparing various materials, and (4) continuous assessment of learners' progress. Although teachers dread the demanding time to plan and are doubtful about the administrative support and availability of materials, starting with positive attitudes towards the change is a must. This study investigated teachers' attitudes towards DI. A sample of 25 preschool teachers responded to a questionnaire and were observed in their classes, of which 12 English language teachers were interviewed as a follow up on their attitudes towards DI and its implementation. Results show that despite the positive attitudes teachers have towards DI, their implementation of it is not satisfactory.

Key words: differentiated instruction, adaptive teaching, inclusive classroom, constructivism, English language, preschool

INTRODUCTION

“Teaching is the process of attending to people’s needs, experiences and feelings, and intervening so that they learn particular things, and go beyond the given.” (Smith, 2012)

Several teaching methods have emerged, each with a significant basis, depending on the circumstances and available resources. Earlier practices focused on the teacher delivering information in a structured manner, while the most recent methodologies are technology-based. However, the focus should be on the individual learners. Since its beginning, the twenty-first century has been recognized as “the century of superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2006; Arnaut et al., 2015). This is reflected in classrooms that are universally filled with children from varied backgrounds, including personality, home background, or cultural upbringing. Inclusive education is currently accepted and practiced worldwide, supporting a multiplicity of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, cultural, and linguistic factors (Gaitas & Alves Martin, 2016). A set curriculum is significant since it plans the sequential development of skills based on related research. However, teachers felt obliged to cover it all as the primary deliverers of information. Consequently, direct instruction by teachers was dominant. The didactic teaching method has been replaced by the notion of differentiated learning (Mayer-Smith & Mitchell, 1997; Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018). Though curricula remain essential as general guidelines, their application had to be thoughtfully used to cater to students' learning to take place, and

thus the emergence of individualized learning instruction. The call was for an approach where learners are actively involved in building their knowledge, which is known as ‘constructivism’. Consequently, the notion of differentiated instruction (DI) prevailed (Suprayogi et al., 2017). This paper deals with the use of DI in teaching English as a second language at the preschool level in Lebanon. The purpose of this study is to determine to what extent preschool language teachers recognize the differences between their current teaching methods and DI practices and to what extent they are willing to adopt DI.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Differentiated Instruction

Educators assert that today’s classrooms face heavy challenges when their goal is to effectively reach all students. With the human rights to education, inclusive classrooms have become more appropriate in the educational system. The inclusive classroom hosts a mix of learners with different backgrounds: gifted and challenged, children on the autism spectrum, auditory and visual, challenging, and disadvantaged. This mirrors the acceptance of physical, emotional, academic, and social diversity (McManis, 2017). The learners were placed in levels according to their age. The class materials, activities, and assessment are geared towards the individual, and the grade-level curriculum has become reachable to all.

Contrary to the myth of “homogeneity by virtue of chronological age” (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 119), DI is an instructional approach proven to reach all students. Classrooms constitute highly advanced learners, underachievers for a multitude of reasons and sometimes a combination of them, motivated and unmotivated learners, and those whose language of instruction is not their native (Understanding Differentiated Instruction: tailoring teaching for diverse learners, 2023). Even when special services such as pull-outs for reading programs or English as a second language are catered for, students in these ‘classical’ classes still spend the majority of their school time in their ‘regular’ classroom. Homogeneous groupings in special education resource rooms also cover less homogeneity than DI classes; students’ range of competence, learning style, and motivation are not met (Gamoran & Weinstein, 1995).

Further research has shown that students who are identified with learning disabilities, besides taking English as a second language, are in a double bind (Tomlinson et al., 2003). DI was not evident even in special bilingual classes, where students were taught as a whole group via the same activities for all. Learners’ interactions in class were minimal, and they exhibited more confusion and frustration than the others. Teachers of those students with both learning and language needs were aware of these difficulties yet did not take into account the quality and amount of student work (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Differentiated instruction has two forms: between class and within-class. The first is practiced in schools at the secondary level, which Bosker and Doolaard (2009, as cited in Stollman, 2019) exemplify in secondary education in the Netherlands. A similar type of secondary education is practiced in Lebanon, the host country of this study; after grade 9, students are divided into one of four sections: humanities, economics, life sciences, and general sciences. Teachers usually advise this differentiation based on students’ educational attainment and interests. Within-class DI has received the most interest and attention in pedagogical research. It is “an approach which proactively takes individual differences into account” (Richards & Omdal, 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2003). DI requires teachers to adapt their teaching methods to meet the educational requirements of each individual student, and is thus considered a complex skill (Denuk et al., 2018). By implementing DI in their classes, teachers can handle the heterogeneity in students’ learning necessities (Roy et al., 2013).

Differentiated instruction is a complex teaching skill that even experienced teachers find difficult to plan and implement. Tomlinson and her associates acknowledged five components

that DI instructional strategies can be assembled into: content, process, product, learning environments, and assessment (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

- Content is the knowledge and skills the students acquire by using the alternative content subject and by supplementing the content to render it reachable to all students.
- The process is how the content is taught through individualized tasks, various teaching modalities, and time schedules.
- The product is what students reveal that they have acquired. Teachers requesting equal products is not compulsory.
- The learning environment is not an intimidating one but sets the high expectations of students (also in Blecker & Boakes, 2010).
- Assessment is a basic component to check students' readiness and learning styles, through preassessment, formative and summative assessments (also in Bourke et al., 2011) that is done through various assessment techniques, in parallel with the student's learning style (also in Heritage, 2007).

The two elements required to achieve DI are teachers' adaptation of instruction and their use of students' requirements through individually collected assessment data (Roy et al., 2013) on students' learning needs. In undifferentiated classrooms, teachers use measures of central tendency (Merk, et al., 2019, as cited in Karst et al., 2022) overlooking the diversity of students. Very few studies report on teachers making use of assessment data analysis and applying it to their instructional planning to select the appropriate instructional method and suitable teaching material to meet the individual students' or to a group of students' needs.

The DI-Quest model describes the extent to which teachers implement what they think about the philosophy of DI and act accordingly (Yuen et al., 2022). The two features highlighted by the model are the growth mindset and ethical encompass (Hall, 2002; Tomlinson, 2001). Mindset can be seen on a continuum. A fixed mindset accepts intellectual ability as determined by genetic characteristics. It focuses on transmitting knowledge irrespective of students' profiles, and therefore deliver closed-ended tasks (Tomlinson, 2001; Yuen et al., 2022). On the other hand, growth-oriented thinking provides students with commitment and engagement to learn more than supposed. The teacher's mindset is a proactive response creating engaging lesson plans, promoting meaningful learning outcomes, and planning instruction flexibly.

The second factor in the DI-Quest model is whether task completion or student growth is the focus. The scope of DI is the student, rather than the use of set curricula (Hall 2002; Tomlinson, 2001; Yuen et al., 2022). The tightly set curriculum adds to the teachers' fears of DI. The contextual constraints were categorized by Kozma (2003, as cited in Yuen et al., 2022) into a three-level contextual model of micro-, meso-, and macro-factors. These components refer to classroom factors including the teacher's skills and students' performance, the immediate environment outside the classroom, which is the school's environment, and factors related to the educational system in general and culture.

Research in Preparing Teachers for Differentiated Instruction

The development of the skill of using differentiated instruction undergoes a gradual process and teachers will eventually develop it through practice over the years and gain confidence in working with DI (Heacox, 2014). However, there is some contradictory research; few teachers actually adapt their classroom teaching method to students' needs. Research found that most primary school teachers did not receive sufficient training to adapt their teaching. Moreover, basic teaching skills far exceeded analyzing students' progress and adapting classroom practices (Inspectice van het Onderwijs, 2015, as cited in van Geel et al., 2022).

A study by Stollman et al. (2019) on the interactive cognitions of teachers during teaching using DI concluded that they were directed towards students' readiness, interests and learning profiles. The teachers accounted for students' readiness in various ways, using a learner-centered approach. The conclusions highlighted that the aim of the teachers and their audiences were also factors affecting the variation. Teachers aim to determine whether they want to meet the immediate needs of the students or whether they are projecting into the coming needs. Whether the teacher is addressing the whole class, smaller groups, or individual students will also contribute to the teachers' cognitions in a DI class.

Gaitas and Alves-Martins (2016) stated that teachers support the philosophy of inclusion; however, they are less supportive of practicing it in their classrooms. They listed the reasons that challenged teachers: lengthy planning time, inadequate schedule blocks, insufficient supply of suitable materials, parents' resistance, assessment anxieties, concerns about their loss of control, and concerns about proper and sufficient training in DI classes. Higher education programs and teacher training usually do not prepare teachers to work in inclusive classrooms (McCrimmon 2015). Thus far, research has not focused on what strategies teachers find more difficult to implement (Lindsay, 2003). Gaitas and Alves-Martins (2016) reported that teachers considered activities and materials related to adaptation of instruction to be the most difficult in relation to learners' varied learning profiles, what they already know, and their readiness. Assessment was considered the second most difficult factor for teachers to deal with, that is, using continuous assessment to adjust material and provide suitable scaffolding to each individual learner. On the other end of the spectrum, teachers found the classroom environment to be positive, providing learners with a safe atmosphere that encourages them to take risks in learning. Concerning the factors of teachers' experience and their perceptions of inclusive education, research results were not conclusive; some concluded that the amount of experience had an impact, while others proved it to have no effect (Gaitas & Alves-Martins, 2016). Some of the most threatening conceivable hindrances to teachers were their perception of themselves as unprepared because of their lack of pedagogical knowledge and skills. In addition, large classrooms, insufficient time and resources, an unsupportive environment, and the differentiation of materials and activities were perceived as burdens to teachers (Yuen et al., 2022).

An effective learning environment caters to the establishment of self-independence and self-management and to a respectful community where diversity is valued (Understanding Differentiated Instruction, 2023). The ongoing assessment is to be valued: pre-assessment to detect readiness levels, formative assessments to identify needs, construction of tiered lessons, and assist students to track their own progress.

To prepare teachers for the full implementation of DI, Dack (2018), based on Tomlinson's (2014) model of differentiated instruction, suggested that teacher education must model the use of DI including responsive instruction. However, it is even more crucial for teachers undergoing training to think about and explain why they make particular decisions and connect them to relevant DI theory. This combination of modeling concurrently with meta-commentary is what Swennen et al. (2008) termed "congruent teaching", over and above intentional modeling. Training programs should provide teachers with two types of pedagogical tools: conceptual that are the guidelines for implementing practical tools, and practical tools that are the applications of conceptual tools (Grossman et al., 2000, as cited in Dack, 2019).

Some studies have reported that secondary and primary teachers occasionally implement DI by setting differentiated learning tasks and goals only (Pozas et al., 2020), yet other research found that primary school teachers employed progress monitoring and instructional adaptations (Prast et al., 2015). Other research has also found that primary school teachers implement a variety of classroom strategies (Adebayo & Shumba, 2014).

Classroom Implementation of Differentiated Instruction

Applying DI within classrooms depends on teachers' goals, which Leuders and Prediger (2017, as cited in Karst et al., 2022) listed as four. The first goal was to get all the students to the same achievement level. This is attained by providing struggling students with remedial work and additional support. This is known as an equalization strategy that brings all students of different capacities to the same academic level. The second goal was to maintain the diversity of the students in focus. Catering to students' differences, teachers work on maximizing the capacity of all students, yet students' learning increases equally, each according to their starting point. This parallel development is a coordinated system that caters to differences. The third and fourth goals also focus on the diversity of students, the same approach to goal two: allowing and appreciating differences, and stimulating and using those differences.

Especially in kindergarten, DI is essential because children come to school with a wide range of developmental and literacy backgrounds (Johnson et al., 2021). Tomlinson (2014) highlights some guiding principles to teachers: focusing on the basics of the lesson, taking into consideration the various readiness levels, interests, and individual learning profiles, attending to individual differences, modifying content, process, and product through activities applying the target skills, and assessing students' achievements not only to be recorded, but also to identify gaps and provide more opportunities for learners who need more support and plan and provide them with more activities.

Successful differentiation concentrates on three main principles: increasing comprehensibility, the opportunity for interaction, and critical thinking and study skills (Understanding Differentiated Instruction, 2023). Some classroom activities to cover these areas incorporate multi-sensory opportunities, provide texts at various reading levels, set learning stations to use with flexible groupings, raise routines for discourse, ask divergent questions to permit various answers, scaffold complex assignments, and enhance metacognition through reflection. Such a strategy allows teachers to tailor to diverse classrooms.

Johnson et al. (2021) focused on the importance of tiered lessons, especially in kindergartens. Children of this age have a wide variety of developmental abilities, readiness, and interests. A tiered lesson is based on level-appropriate standards, expectations, and essential skills, yet tiered into three levels based on students' readiness and choices. Centers or tiered lessons (Johnson et al., 2021) are as follows.

- Tier 1 (novice), build basic knowledge, understanding, or skills;
- Tier 2 (basic), encompasses activities to apply and manipulate knowledge built in tier 1, and
- Tier 3 (proficient), partakes activities that extend students' thinking.

Other factors that teachers should consider in DI are class design and management; teachers are required to consider classroom space and material; themes and content are to be integrated; and center-based groups can change when centers change- weekly, every other, quarterly. The tiered centers were introduced slowly and individually. Slowdown at the beginning: the first 4-6 weeks are needed at the beginning of the year to model the desired work. Time is spent on the actual functioning of the center before any content learning is added (Johnson et al., 2021).

Tomlinson et al. (2003) distinguished three types of student characteristics: readiness, interest, and learning profile. The first is based on the Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD). Individual learners can achieve this either by themselves if they work at their current level or with help. Interest is based on the concept that learners achieve better and higher scores if they find the subject interesting. Individual students' learning profiles "refer to a student's preferred mode of learning that can be affected by a number of factors" (Tomlinson

et al., 2003, p. 129). Their background, including age, ethnicity, learning style, and intelligence preference, affect their mastery of the material.

Johnson et al. (2021) added that students with less developed readiness need direct instruction to identify and fill gaps in their learning. More structured instruction and activities, fewer steps, and simpler skills catered to this type of student. Advanced students use more complex, abstract, and open-ended activities to trigger their thinking at a quick pace. Sometimes, working at a slower pace is advised for more in-depth exploration of concepts.

Three general principles direct individual differentiation (Pham, 2011). The first is related to moderately challenging tasks in relation to the Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Second, flexible groupings allow students to learn several key issues, such as experiencing several roles while working in pairs or groups, as well as social and collaborative experiences.

What takes place in a class is divided between the teacher and student (Pettig, 2000). Moreover, through grouping, teachers have more flexibility to work with learners who require extra time. Classrooms should be arranged physically to promote interaction (Pham, 2011). Teachers should engage in ongoing assessment setting appropriate scaffolding to set the zone of proximal development of each learner, giving each individual the opportunity to develop and demonstrate their skills (Pham, 2011) besides planning appropriate material at appropriate levels to further promote learners' development. For practical implementation in teaching reading skills, teachers prepare leveled texts, provide a variety of response options such as book talks and graphic organizers, and generate writing activities such as book reviews and journals through literacy stations guided by the teacher (Understanding Differentiated Instruction, 2023).

DI in English Language Learning

Differentiated instruction in English language arts classes is necessary as each student comes with their own strengths and challenges. Some are beginners in language learning, while others are halfway in their journey and others are quite advanced in their language proficiency (Lopez, 2024). Coelho (n.d.), in her article "differentiated instruction for English language learners", defined English language learners as those learners whose first language is not English and whose second language learning at school is a long process that necessitates focused support. She listed several strategies and tasks to promote language learning in the classroom. For this study, the following are some of her teacher strategies and student activities for preschool children. Language teachers need to build on students' background knowledge and select oral and written topics that children can understand. Teachers must tolerate students' language errors, focus on meaning, and limit their feedback to modeling the correct language. Teachers plan groups for students to practice their sociolinguistic skills such as greetings, polite expressions, and classroom routines. Students were encouraged to label objects and select reading materials at their level.

In a language classroom, the processes of preassessment, grouping strategies, and content differentiation apply (Lopez, 2024). Assessment can include informal discussions, observations, or tests. Based on the results, teachers group students according to their objectives and student levels. Whole-class instruction involves presenting foundational concepts and skills. Small groups are based on common students' levels, while pairs are assigned to students who need more help; they are paired with one member of a slightly higher level than the other. Moreover, individual work is allotted to students who need to focus on specific needs (Lopez, 2024; Williams, 2022). Lopez (2024) added that differentiating the content to secure the matching reading material to the student's level is done either by providing different books or by modifying texts, making reading accessible to all. If neither is possible, then providing pre-reading strategies is a solution. Third, three suggested strategies

are listed: scaffolding by breaking down complex skills into smaller ones, using graphic organizers such as visual aids and mind maps, and assigning think-pair-share, a cooperative strategy that fosters discussions.

Williams (2022) listed the needs of students that affect teachers' differentiation strategies: students' linguistic readiness, including prior knowledge and basic skills; topics of interest to promote students' motivation; their learning profiles; and their linguistic proficiency, including learned key vocabulary. Ford (2012) added the importance of maintaining high expectations of their language learners, allowing and accepting students' learning and expression at their own language proficiency level. Homework assignments should also be differentiated to avoid some students struggling to do it, while others' work is easy.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses the mixed method approach which collects quantitative and qualitative data. The former is via a questionnaire and classroom observation and the latter is via an interview. It aims to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are preschool teachers aware of the differentiated instruction strategy?
2. To what extent are the preschool teachers willing to practice DI in their classrooms?

The purpose of this study is to develop a teacher support system that provides appropriate guidance for the transition to DI in their classrooms.

Context

The study was conducted in the English preschool section of a trilingual private school in the northern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon. English is the medium of instruction, and is considered a foreign language. The current teaching method varies from teacher-centered to the use of videos to introduce new concepts and themes. The teacher introduces the lesson and vocabulary with the help of pictures. Children then obtain their workbooks and fill in the matching pages. Teachers work with a group of pupils, while other pupils gather in groups of 4-5 to work on additional laminated sheets to further practice a skill learned and/or to share puzzles, building blocks, and other games. The worksheets and activities vary across groups; however, they are all of the same type and level, where children have to trace lines, shapes, alphabets, and numbers.

Participants

Twenty-five teachers of different subjects in the preschool English section participate in the data collection. They have different years of teaching experience varying from three years to 30 years. The subjects taught are English, Arabic, and French. Teachers of Arabic or French enter these classes only a few hours a week. Twelve of the total are homeroom teachers, who are the English language teachers and the primary caregivers of their class. They are responsible for the children's educational, emotional, psychological, and physical conduct, and growth. Besides English, they teach other subjects such as mathematics and science, using English as the medium of instruction. They also assist with art, sports, libraries, and other preschool subjects to promote the use of English. These are the core participants who are interviewed besides being observed.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study are a teacher's questionnaire, interviews, and classroom observation. The questionnaire is of six five-point-scale questions from "not at all" to "extremely" with an additional "do not know" column and four open-ended questions (Appendix A). It aims to measure teachers' knowledge about DI, whether they prefer their current teaching methods over DI, and what benefits and challenges they face in DI. The

questions are constructed based on a one-hour workshop that introduced them to DI briefly through the activities they participated in as students (Yazigy, 2024). During the workshop, teachers had the opportunity to share their experiences when they were students in school. They reported their unique experiences when they were shamed by their teachers and expressed how they would not want to repeat these practices with their own children and students.

An interview is conducted to identify English language teachers' attitudes towards adapting their current teaching methods to those of DI. The questions are open-ended to further elaborate and double-check the respondents' answers. The focus is on determining the challenges faced in planning and implementing DI.

Dr. Van Broekhuizen's Cogna Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (2012) (Appendix B) is used after obtaining their permission. It comprises seven basis categories (A-G), with a total of twenty-eight items to note the ratio of teacher-to-student talk and their exchanges. The researcher filled in the form rating whether the teachers provide equitable opportunities and activities to all learners based on their individual needs, providing students with occasions to set high expectations. Other items look at the active engagement of students in their learning process and at monitoring their own progress and the teacher's assessment and feedback. In brief, the purpose of the class observations is to identify the active participation of students in their learning and to what extent the teachers are supportive of this. Although all items have been observed and recorded, for the purpose of the current study, selected items in categories A to G are concentrated on in the analysis of the results.

Procedure

Data collection is conducted in the spring of 2024. The questionnaire is emailed to the twenty-five teachers with a note about the purpose of the study and ensured the anonymity of their responses. All participants responded to the questionnaire within two days. The participating teachers rated the suitability of their current teaching practices for preschool children on a five-point scale. In the open-ended section, they shared how much they knew about DI and whether they were willing to put it into practice. They also shared the differences they perceived between their current teaching methods and their DI. Finally, they had the chance to write about what they found very good about DI and its difficulties.

After collecting the questionnaires, the researcher interviewed only the twelve English language teachers regarding their perceptions of DI. Each teacher is interviewed alone for 15-20 minutes. The questions are based on the questionnaires to further elaborate and double-check the respondents' answers. Notes are made regarding the responses for the later analysis.

As for classroom observations, the researcher attended each class twice. Teachers were informed about the visits, but not the specific time. The items on the teachers' conduct and students' active participation. are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, and notes are added where necessary. The observations take place at different times during the class sessions: some are at the beginning of the sessions and others are at the middle or end of classes.

RESULTS

This study focuses on teachers' knowledge of DI and how they compare it to the more traditional teacher-oriented way of teaching. The results were reported according to the teachers' responses to the teachers' questionnaire, interviews, and observations of English language classes.

Questionnaire Results and Analysis

The following are the responses of the 25 teachers in numbers (Table 1) and percentages (Figure 1).

Table 1. The teachers’ responses on the questionnaire items in numbers

	Not at All	Somehow	Moderately	A Lot	Extremely	Do Not Know
1. The current teaching practice is suitable for preschool children.	0	1	5	9	10	0
2. Of what I know about DI, I find it applicable.	0	3	11	8	3	0
3. Of what I know about DI, I am willing to apply it in my classes.	0	3	12	10	1	0
4. DI will cater more for individual children than the current practice.	0	0	6	10	9	0
5. DI will require a special lesson plan format & content.	0	0	4	9	12	0
6. DI will provide children with the opportunity to work on activities that cater for their individual needs.	0	0	4	5	16	0

For the first item, only 1 teacher stated that the current teaching practice is only ‘somehow’ suitable for preschool children, while 9 (35%) ranked that item as “a lot” and 10 (41%) as ‘extremely’ suitable. This means that the majority of the respondents found the current teaching practice suitable for preschool children. At the same time, eight teachers (32%) believed that they found DI applicable depending on what they knew about it, while 11 (44%) said that they found it only ‘moderately’ applicable. Similarly, the majority of responses to item 3 that they were willing to apply DI in their classes clustered around ‘moderately’ (12, 47%) and “a lot” (10, 41%). The highest number of responses to item 4 about DI catering more for individual children is “a lot” (10, 41%) and 9 (35%) ‘extremely’. The other 6 teachers (24%) reported ‘moderately’. Regarding the requirements for a special lesson plan format and content for DI, the majority (12, 47%) reported ‘extremely so’, while 9 (35%) said ‘a lot’ and the rest, 4 (16%) reported ‘moderately’. For the last item, DI will provide children with the opportunity to work on activities that cater to their individual needs; 16 (65%) teachers reported ‘extremely’ and 5 (18%) “a lot”.

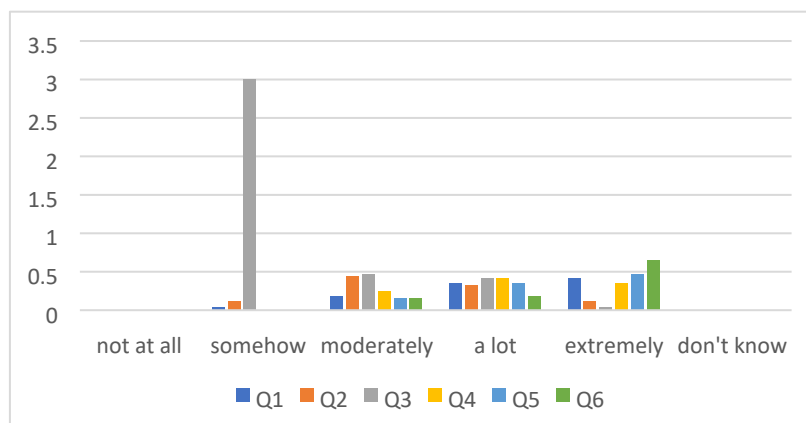


Figure 1. Teachers' responses on questionnaire items in percentages

It is obvious that the teachers’ responses were more towards the positive side of the evaluation of DI and its implementation. It is worth noting that the two extremes on the scale,

“not at all” and “do not know” did not get any response. The former clearly showed no negative perception of DI, and the latter may reflect what they learned about DI from the workshop.

Regarding the open-ended questions, all respondent teachers defined DI as a way to cater to all students in the classroom, ranging from special needs to challenging students, by varying the teaching methods, materials, and activities, accommodating all learning styles, needs, and levels. The focus was on meeting individual needs, interests, and ‘intelligences’ through the learning process.

The participating teachers in this study shared a wide variety of comparison points between their current teaching practices and DI requirements. Table 2 summarizes these views.

The favorable points raised by the participating teachers about DI can be divided into two main categories: teacher-related and product-related. The first includes verbal support, use of technology, and teaching the same material in different ways, depending on students’ learning styles and attention to learners with special needs. The resulting advantages anticipated by teachers are flexible learning, collaborative learning, practical skills, student ownership of learning, and the focus of each student on their potential at their own pace.

The majority of teachers dread the DI for several reasons. They mainly fear the ‘extra’ time they need to put into DI planning and the number of students in each class, which averages 22 learners. They also found a challenge in the availability of supporting material, classroom management, the variety of methods to be used with this number, and the limited time given. The lack of teacher assistants hinders the capability to provide the variety needed to recognize individual opportunities practically.

Table 2. Teachers’ comparison between their current teaching method and DI requirements

Current Teaching Practice	Differentiated Instruction Requirements
Teacher-centered	Student-centered
Same way of instruction	Different ways depending on how each child ‘understands’
Pen and paper worksheets	Hands-on activities
Same objectives, lesson plans and resources for all students	Same objectives but different lesson plans and resources
Sometimes the lesson itself is not interesting to the children	Lessons are based on the children’s choice of the theme
Assessment is one for all	Assessment has to depend on each child’s ability
Teachers explain everything to the students	Create lesson plan to help each student make learning fun
Traditional classroom: instructions are provided one way	Teachers know the needs of each student
Learning is not personalized	Students are given the choice and flexibility in how they ‘learn’
Barely do activities and learning centers	More discussions and individual work thus students feel accepted and motivated
Books are the basis of instruction and thus students’ focus is minimal	New environment is created using different teaching styles
Special needs are not recognized	Special needs are met
Does not focus on the individual student	Individualized

Interview Results and Analysis

The interviews with the 15 English teachers show that they all favor the theory of DI, as it caters to individual needs. However, except for one teacher, they object to its application in their classes, fearing preparation time because of the large number of students in each section. To these two hindering factors, most teachers add a lack of resources and materials to implement DI. Some suggest having a teacher assistant in each class to take care of the big group while providing for the smaller ones. The interviews yielded results parallel to the questionnaire ratings.

Classroom Observation Results

The class observations using Van Broekhuizen's cognea Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (2012) show that the main current teaching method is more teacher-centered: teachers introduce the lesson and explain it through oral presentations with the help of theme-related videos. The teacher explained the application of the new concept by presenting the related worksheet on the interactive board, explaining it, and then sending the children to their seats to apply it. Thus, minimal child input is noticed, and oral language using new vocabulary and sentence structures is hindered by teacher talk.

Class activities are witnessed as one-for-all (category A item 1). Upon completion of their work on the worksheet, students either waited quietly on their tables or got a set of building blocks to fill their time. Concerning the second category, high expectations environment - items 1, 2, and 5 – teachers do not set challenging tasks, nor do children express any accountability towards their work quality and standards. Very few children volunteer for a discussion or task “taking risks” in their learning process.

As for the fourth category, active learning, since teacher talk prevails, class exchanges are rather limited to teacher questions and students' answers. Little connection is made to real-life experiences, let alone to build on children's previous experiences (which is not a specified item in the current observation sheet); thus, minimal dialogue is recorded, which reflects that learning in the current teaching methodology is more teacher-oriented and less student-involvement.

Assessment and feedback, category E, is limited to teachers' corrections of children's work on their activity sheets. Students were not asked to explain their answers nor were they given oral feedback on their work. No further reteaching or any other follow-up was observed based on students' work. It is corrected and labeled either with a smiley face or 'good work'. All this activity happens in a well-conducted environment where children know and apply classroom rules and respect their teacher (category F). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the actual active time for the students was approximately one-fourth of the total class time. In an EFL class, children are given many opportunities to use and practice the foreign language they are learning, which is the medium of instruction.

Moreover, although students work in groups of four or five, while the teacher works with one group on new material given that day, the children are either playing with building blocks or tracing lines on laminated sheets. Thus, children do not have the say or choice of what they prefer to work on.

The digital learning environment, category G of the observation sheet, is 'unobserved' except for the teachers' showing of some theme-related videos and worksheets to be worked on. Students do not have access to digital tools for learning or applying content.

DISCUSSION

After conducting the research and obtaining the results, it can be observed that the three instruments yielded comparable results. Though the teachers are aware of the importance of DI, their implementation is not similar to what they report in the questionnaire. This result is comparable to Gaitas and Alves-Martins (2016) research findings. This is further discussed through answering the research questions of this study.

The research questions are answered.

1. *To what extent are preschool teachers aware of the differentiated instruction strategy?*

While participating teachers implemented a teacher-centered approach in their classrooms, their first encounter with DI occurred during one workshop. After that, they became interested in and asked about more details how DI functions and how it might help them implement it. Obviously, whether novice or experienced, all teachers should be trained in DI skills and be supported and followed up in their DI classes for a successful transition to DI. It is recommended that prime consideration be given to DI complex teaching skills before and during the training phase (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2015, as cited in van Geel et al., 2022).

2. *To what extent are the preschool teachers willing to practice DI in their classrooms?*

Although the majority of the participants were willing to apply DI in their classrooms, they feared the challenges of the transition. Teachers dread the long time spent planning their teaching as well as the number of students in their classrooms. Moreover, they expressed worries about the extra material needed to set up their classes for different levels of students. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers undergo training. Research shows that formal professional development activities, such as team meetings, participating in course workshops, and visiting other schools, help teachers to focus on content. Informal professional development should also be enhanced through the collective participation of teachers (Desimone, 2009 & Timperely, 2008, cited in van Geel et al., 2022). This includes reading professional literature, engaging in conversations with other teachers, and observing colleagues in practice (Jones & Dexter, 2014 OECD, 2009, cited in van Geel et al., 2022). Both, formal and informal professional development programs should guide teachers in providing opportunities for learners to apply what they have learned.

These answers were limited to the sample of participants in the study. A wider sample over an extended period may yield different results. However, the researcher's use of more than one instrument to collect the data, the interview to confirm the open-ended questions of the questionnaire, the two observations of each class, and the use of the cognea observation sheet, all contribute to the objectivity of the results.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Heterogeneity in 21st century classrooms cannot be faced, except through differentiated instruction. Teachers need to consider students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles by planning appropriate content and considering the process and learning product as Tomlinson (2017) reassures. Learning itself is a complex process for all people of all ages and the diversity of learners in our classes both prove that one size does not fit all.

As the results of this study show, the current teaching methodology is based on teacher talk, and the classrooms are not equipped with activities and tasks of different levels and types catering to diverse student potentials. The prevalence of structured, teacher-led classes hinders students from taking responsibility for and initiative in their learning. It does not show them how to evaluate their performance to achieve better performance in the future. Teachers are limited to teaching and correcting while not building on students' performance in planning reteaching and providing a wide variety of learning activities to be conducted either individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

Differentiated instruction is suggested as a remedy for our classes. The basic steps of DI start with preassessment, where teachers get to know students' learning styles, interests, and needs. In the second-stage teachers engage in planning for a variety of approaches and materials of different levels for students' learning of the same objectives. Materials have become a guideline for heterogeneous teaching tailored to students' individual learning needs. The material must be triggered towards the learning objectives of the whole class, yet they are set at different levels, fulfilling the same objectives. Briefly, assessment, instructional methods, and materials work together to provide DI (Karst et al., 2022).

After students' preassessment, the selection of appropriate instructional methods, teaching materials, and setting up stations and groups is important. Students work at their own pace and interest, each achieving their own level +1 is a basic part of teachers' preparation for a DI class. Continuous assessment and follow-up with challenged students become habitual actions.

Especially for English as a foreign language learners, distinct approaches are to be singled. Students are exposed to and are expected to master the English language since it is the medium of instruction in the target country of the current study. Thus, teachers are included in their differentiated lesson plan approaches and activities, which instigate efficient language learning. Total physical responses, visuals, peer learning where stronger readers are paired with struggling ones, and sentence frames where students are provided with partially completed sentences are recommended (Understanding Differentiated Instruction, 2023).

According to Gaitas and Alves Martins (2016), "learning to teach is the orchestration of various domains of knowledge" (p. 13). Therefore, DI is best implemented proactively rather than reactively in different classes, and specifically in ESL classes (Parker, n.d.). It is advised that when teachers foresee that DI implementation in classes is necessary, they plan for it before actually entering the classroom. Their lesson plans should include a variety of topics in different formats to cater to all students' background knowledge and learning styles. The levels of activities to be worked on in small groups should be adapted to suit the students' abilities (Stollman et al., 2019).

Published textbooks written based on curricula set by different countries, and strategically sequenced, do not cater to all learners, especially the challenged ones. The textbooks chosen by schools for classroom use are usually set for average students. They did not intentionally accommodate today's inclusive classrooms. The reading material should match students' different skill levels, videos should be accompanied by subtitles, groups should be built based on common levels of skills and knowledge, and assessment rubrics should be set for different levels. They should be provided to each student's level and skills, matching the learning styles and familiar backgrounds (Parker, n.d.). Parker further suggested that learners complete content only up to their level, highlighting that some may remember and understand only, while others may reach application and analysis levels in relation to Bloom's taxonomy. Besides being proactive, teachers reactively engage in making decisions as their classes proceed and as the situation mandates (Denessen & Douglas, 2015).

Assessment persists as a key factor in English as a foreign language classes to recognize the students' levels and adapt the instruction to provide the appropriate levels, time, and reteaching opportunities. For challenged students, multi-sensory approaches, the incorporation of technology, customized assignments, and diverse assessment modes are implemented (Understanding Differentiated Instruction, 2023). Classrooms should be based on habitual continuous assessments, on which teachers base their instructional planning. Assessment allows teachers to plan and framework learners with the appropriate materials and activities. Consequently, learners engage in alternative learning, scaffolding their actual needs and interests (Gaitas & Alves Martin, 2016).

Teacher education should promote inquiry strategies in teachers so that they indulge in self-examination and promotion of their own skills to face the inclusive classroom. Teacher training programs should include topics such as classroom organization and management, curriculum planning, assessing learners' differences, and classroom diversity. Teachers should also practice collective reflection during regular meetings to discuss DI with instructional support teams (Gaitas, 2016). These meetings were planned as part of the teachers' schedules.

Finally, the educational system, devoid of DI, will leave many learners behind as their needs will go unmet. With DI, teachers avoid the drawbacks of planning and teaching the middle or the norm, resulting in bell-shaped learners' outcomes. However, one size does not fit all. Differentiated instruction addresses classroom diversity to achieve learning (Gheysens et al., 2020). Students in each class from different backgrounds and individual needs can experience a safe and motivating learning environment, leading to success. The gifted get accelerated and the challenges are scaffolded based on their zone of proximal development (Understanding Differentiated Instruction: tailoring teaching for diverse learners, 2023).

There are many challenges; however, the efforts are worth reaching the challenging, the challenged, and every other individual learner on the spectrum. Teaching, like any other profession and skill, is a bundle of skills that undergoes continuous development. Teachers need not fear moving on, challenging, or changing the teaching methods they were raised on as students. Whether experienced or novice, prior school students and current teachers would have enjoyed learning more if their individual idiosyncrasies, readiness, needs, and interests were taken into consideration and catered for. What is a profession without a challenge: DI is a valuable experience for both teachers and students, where classes are filled with personalized care that promotes positive attitudes toward learning as well as higher achievement and attainment of new knowledge. "Learning to teach is an ongoing process" (Dack, 2019, p. 125). Teacher education must address the entirety of teaching skills and not only focus on academic content. DI has gained eminence worldwide for its effectiveness on students' general personal and pedagogic growth; thus, accepting and adopting this approach, especially in our preschool EFL classes, gives youngsters the chance to grow happily, well taken care of.

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APPENDIX A

Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear PreSchool Teachers,

As we have started to work on *Differentiated Instruction* (DI), you are kindly requested to fill in the following table and add your personal comments. Feel free to share your truthful opinions and remain reassured that your answers will remain anonymous. This mini survey will not take more than five minutes of your time.

Thank you for your contribution which is extremely essential for future work.

		Not at All	A Bit	Moderately	A Lot	Extremely	Do Not Know
1	The current teaching practice is suitable for preschool children.						
2	Of what I know about <i>DI</i> , I find it applicable.						
3	Of what I know about <i>DI</i> , I am willing to apply it in my classes.						
4	<i>DI</i> will cater more for individual children than the current practice.						
5	<i>DI</i> will require a special lesson plan format & content.						
6	<i>DI</i> will provide children with the opportunity to work on activities that cater for their individual needs.						

This is what I know about *differentiated instruction*:

The main difference between the current teaching practices and *differentiated instruction* is:

This is what I find very good about *differentiated instruction*:

This is what I find difficult about *differentiated instruction*:

APPENDIX B

Cognea Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool



Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (eleot® 2.0)

The purpose of this tool is to help you identify and document observable evidence of classroom environments that are conducive to student learning. Circle the number that corresponds with your observation of each learning environment item descriptor below. As needed and appropriate make inquiries with learners.

Date _____ School _____ City _____ State/Province _____ Country _____ Grade Levels _____

Time In _____ Time Out _____ Check ALL that apply: Lesson Beg _____ Lesson Mid _____ Lesson End _____ Subject Observed _____ Observer _____

	Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
A. Equitable Learning Environment:				
1. Learners engage in differentiated learning opportunities and/or activities that meet their needs	4	3	2	1
2. Learners have equal access to classroom discussions, activities, resources, technology, and support	4	3	2	1
3. Learners are treated in a fair, clear and consistent manner	4	3	2	1
4. Learners demonstrate and/or have opportunities to develop empathy/respect/appreciation for differences in abilities, aptitudes, backgrounds, cultures, and/or other human characteristics, conditions and dispositions	4	3	2	1
B. High Expectations Environment:				
1. Learners strive to meet or are able to articulate the high expectations established by themselves and/or the teacher	4	3	2	1
2. Learners engage in activities and learning that are challenging but attainable	4	3	2	1
3. Learners demonstrate and/or are able to describe high quality work	4	3	2	1
4. Learners engage in rigorous coursework, discussions, and/or tasks that require the use of higher order thinking (e.g., analyzing, applying, evaluating, synthesizing)	4	3	2	1
5. Learners take responsibility for and are self-directed in their learning	4	3	2	1
C. Supportive Learning Environment:				
1. Learners demonstrate a sense of community that is positive, cohesive, engaged, and purposeful	4	3	2	1
2. Learners take risks in learning (without fear of negative feedback)	4	3	2	1
3. Learners are supported by the teacher, their peers and/or other resources to understand content and accomplish tasks	4	3	2	1
4. Learners demonstrate a congenial and supportive relationship with their teacher	4	3	2	1
D. Active Learning Environment:				
1. Learners' discussions/dialogues/exchanges with each other and the teacher predominate	4	3	2	1
2. Learners make connections from content to real-life experiences	4	3	2	1
3. Learners are actively engaged in the learning activities	4	3	2	1
4. Learners collaborate with their peers to accomplish/complete projects, activities, tasks and/or assignments	4	3	2	1
E. Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment:				
1. Learners monitor their own learning progress or have mechanisms whereby their learning progress is monitored	4	3	2	1
2. Learners receive/respond to feedback (from teachers/peers/other resources) to improve understanding and/or revise	4	3	2	1
3. Learners demonstrate and/or verbalize understanding of the lesson/content	4	3	2	1
4. Learners understand and/or are able to explain how their work is assessed	4	3	2	1
F. Well-Managed Learning Environment:				
1. Learners speak and interact respectfully with teacher(s) and each other	4	3	2	1
2. Learners demonstrate knowledge of and/or follow classroom rules and behavioral expectations and work well with others	4	3	2	1
3. Learners transition smoothly and efficiently from one activity to another	4	3	2	1
4. Learners use class time purposefully with minimal wasted time or disruptions	4	3	2	1
G. Digital Learning Environment				
1. Learners use digital tools/technology to gather, evaluate, and/or use information for learning	4	3	2	1
2. Learners use digital tools/technology to conduct research, solve problems, and/or create original works for learning	4	3	2	1
3. Learners use digital tools/technology to communicate and/or work collaboratively for learning	4	3	2	1