**Application and evaluation of differentiated vocabulary instruction in an EFL Greek primary school context**

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**Abstract**

Differentiated instruction is an educational approach that adjusts instruction to meet the needs of every student. This is done through a combination of strategies proven effective in teaching at the student’s point of learning acquisition. Because traditional instruction tends to ‘teach to the middle’, the needs of advanced and struggling students are not always adequately addressed. This article is aimed at presenting and discussing the results of a short-scaled study on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction strategies on young learners’ achievement and motivation.

**Key words**: Differentiated instruction, vocabulary teaching, motivation, academic acheivement

1. **Introduction**

The Greek EFL classroom of the 21st century is under evolution and in this last decade it is evident that the population of our schools is changing, perhaps more so than ever before. In large part, this is due to changes in societal expectations as well as due to economic and political factors that directly affect public education. More than that, students enter school replete with differences in personality, background and capabilities. According to Tomlinson (2000, p.1) “students who are the same age differ in their readiness to learn, their interests, their styles of learning, their experiences, and their life circumstances”. Today’s classroom is a tapestry of the world around us. Seated side by side are students of various nationalities and cultural background; students diagnosed with learning problems; gifted students; children with dissimilar learning needs and a plethora of capabilities, varying interests and preferred learning styles; motivated and unmotivated students (Tomlinson et al, 2003).

This mosaic of students is a representation of our society which is transforming itself, requiring a similar transformation in the role of the teacher and the instruction modes currently used. If teachers want to face successfully the complex pedagogical dilemmas of today’s classroom, they should learn to develop classroom routines that exploit learner variance instead of ignoring it (Lou et al., 1996). Students should not be expected to change themselves in order to fit in the agenda; on the contrary, teachers should modify the curriculum and presentation techniques in order to meet their students’ needs (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001).

In light of the above reality the study presented in this article sought to investigate whether differentiated instruction (DI) can equip the teacher with the necessary knowledge and tools to provide all learners with equal opportunities to learn and thrive. In particular, the research sought to examine how the implementation of DI strategies into primary school vocabulary teaching may affect young learners’ achievement and motivation.

1. **Literature Review**
   1. **Definition of differentiated instruction and key elements**

Tomlinson (2005), as a leading expert in the field, defines differentiated instruction as a philosophy of teaching and learning based on the conviction that each learner is unique and describes it as proactive, qualitative in nature, rooted in assessment, student centered and organic. Womerly (2006) explains that DI is “a collection of best practices strategically employed to maximize students’ learning at every turn, including giving them tools to handle anything that is undifferentiated” (p.3). In essence, no matter which definition we use, DI requires teachers to understand each of their students and be able to present input and provide access to curriculum in a variety of ways, to ensure that all students are learning.

In order to fully understand the underlying concepts of DI, there are certain misunderstandings to be clarified. The DI teacher does not try to provide different materials, methods of learning, objectives and pacing for each and every student (Kiato, 1994). On the contrary, he/she focuses on “meaningful learning or powerful ideas for all students” (Tomlinson, 2001, p.2) by planning several activity options, not one for each student. The DI teacher does not design isolated tasks but he/she works with the whole class, small groups, individual students or a combination of all three. DI is not about homogenous grouping; on the contrary, the use of flexible grouping is a hallmark of the DI classroom. When teachers ask advanced learners to do extra work or assign the same tasks to the whole class and then let fast finishers play games are not differentiating their lesson to address their learners’ variance (Xanthou & Pavlou, undated).

In order to effectively differentiate instruction, sound teaching principles must be honoured. Firstly, the teacher must set clear learning goals, have high expectations and be familiar with the learners’ differences that affect their learning in the particular unit (Loveland, undated). DI is rooted in assessment and the teacher should constantly assess the students’ ability level in order to be able to scaffold their learning with appropriate materials and placement (Tate & Debroux, 2001). Assessment is on-going enabling the measurement of what students have learned and what weaknesses remain. DI is proactive, not reactive (Tomlinson, 2001) and the teacher determines from the outset how he/she intends to address learners’ different needs rather than trying to make adjustments after the fact (Mitchel & Hobson, 2005, Tomlinson, 2001).

**2.2. Differentiating curricular elements**

The curricular elements that can be differentiated are: content, process and product. According to Tomlinson (2001) content can be differentiated in two ways: by adapting what is taught or by modifying how we give learners access to the intended knowledge. The teacher may decide to differentiate by using texts at varying reading levels, supplementary materials, the internet or flexible grouping. The goal when teachers differentiate content is to help all students move towards proficiency on the same curriculum objectives.

Process refers to the “how” of teaching, that is, how the learners can be helped to assimilate concepts or skills. This is nothing more than the activities teachers use to help students make sense of the new ideas introduced and conquer the new knowledge. Tasks should range on a continuum of simple to complex so as to cater for all students from the most advanced to the struggling ones. Teachers can also differentiate the process by applying flexible grouping according to their students’ abilities, interests or their preferred ways of learning (Tomlinson, 2001)

Product is the output of the unit, that is, how the students will demonstrate their learning. By varying the type and complexity of the products, the teacher can cater for the students’ different abilities. Students working below grade level can have different or reduced performance expectations than those at grade level or above.

**2.3. Differentiating for students traits**

Students can perform better and connect to their learning in an environment where their differences in readiness, interests and learning profiles are accommodated, respected and valued (Gregory & Chapman, 2002).

When teachers differentiate by readiness, they design lessons that vary in degrees of complexity and difficulty so as to challenge learners at all levels of the achievement spectrum-high, low and middle. This does not mean that higher-performing students do interesting tasks and lower-performing students do dull drills. On the contrary, all learners are engaged in meaningful work and study important skills and ideas. The goal of the teacher when using readiness to differentiate content, process and product, is to push the students a little bit beyond their comfort zone so as to expand on their knowledge and progress at their own pace (Tomlinson, 2001).

According to Tomlinson (2001), the students’ different interests when exploited wisely, can be a powerful motivator and an asset in the hands of the teacher. Even struggling students have passions and topics that excite their curiosity and attention and it is up to the teacher to discover them and offer opportunities to these learners to explore and express them. Learner engagement is achieved not only when students’ interests are met but also when they are given choices. Offering students a choice about what or how to learn is very empowering and very validating for them.

When differentiating by learning profile, the teacher aims to design lessons which can accommodate class diversity deriving from differences in learning style, intelligence preference, gender and culture. At this point, learners’ preference to work individually or with a group, to learn material which is more personal or impersonal, to prefer more competitive or collaborative learning are taken into consideration.

1. **Research Methodology**
   1. **Research aims**

The main aim of the research was the implementation of differentiated instructional strategies into primary school vocabulary teaching and the evaluation of its effect on young learners’ achievement and motivation. In particular, the study attempted to provide answers to five major research questions in the ex post facto phase:

1. What are the effects of differentiated vocabulary instruction on young learners’ achievement?
2. How can DI with the use of educational technology influence learners’ motivation?
3. What is the impact of DI practices on struggling learners?
4. What is the impact of DI practices on advanced learners?
5. How can educational technology facilitate the implementation of DI?
   1. **Participants**

The participants were thirty four pupils who attended the fourth grade and comprised two separated groups both of which were exposed to DI. The learners aged between nine and ten years old were mainly of Greek origin with the exception of five Albanian and three Russian ones. In addition, they comprised a heterogeneous mix of ability levels including five students diagnosed with learning difficulties.

At the time of the research their language level ranged from A1 to A2 (Beginner to Elementary) with the majority being in their fourth year of studying English. A small number was in their second year of English language learning while two of the learners were in their fifth year of learning English. The majority of the learners reported to attend English lessons outside school in private institutions or at home by a private tutor while only a small percentage restricted their English language learning to what they were taught at school.

* 1. **Research Method**

The study utilized a mixed-method design to collect and analyze data. Both quantitative research methods (pre/post-tests, questionnaires, post-meant mini-quiz) and qualitative ones (observation, interviews) were employed to collect data during the pre-, while- and post-intervention phases.

* 1. **Research Instruments**
     1. **The student profile questionnaire**

A student profile questionnaire was used to collect the personal information needed for the creation of the learners’ profiles. The instrument consisted of four parts: the first included factual questions covering demographic characteristics (age, nationality, mother tongue) and facts about the learners’ language history (how long they have been learning English and whether or not they take English lessons outside school). The second part was an interest inventory gathering information about the interests of the particular groups of learners while the fourth part focused on learning styles preferences.

* + 1. **The self-perception report**

Harter’s (2012) Self-Perception Profile for children (SPPC) was used to gather data about the students’ self-image - this is a self-report instrument assessing how school children (grades 3-8) perceive their competence in different domains-scholastic competence, athletic competence, physical appearance, behavioural conduct. It was used specifically to gather information about the learners’ scholastic competence, that is, how the learners themselves perceive their cognitive competence as applied in school work.

* + 1. **Pre and Post Tests**

Four pre-tests were used containing 53 vocabulary items in total. Each one contained a different cluster of vocabulary items such as household chores, jobs, fruit and vegetables, cooking. The selection of the particular lexical units was based on the syllabus of the school text book and the results of the interest inventory. The tests served a dual purpose because they were used both as a pre-assessment of the learners’ readiness level and as post-tests to determine how far each student had managed to proceed in their effort to acquire knowledge. The learners were evaluated against themselves and not against other students who may have displayed different skills and abilities (Tomlinson, 2005).

* + 1. **The Post-meant mini-quiz**

This was used to gather feedback on the implementation of the approach. Ten prompts were posed to students who were asked to answer using a three-point smilegram, that is, a Likert scale variation. The statements sought to investigate learners’ opinions on the new strategies employed and the effect they felt these strategies had on their performance.

* + 1. **Observation form**

An observation form was used to measure the levels of learners’ participation and engagement as well as the effects of the various technology tools and differentiation strategies applied. Short notes were made during the lessons while the learners were engaged in activities but most of the remarks were added immediately after the end of each lesson followed by some reflection notes.

* + 1. **Mini-interviews**

The mini-interviews involved seven students coming from all ability levels in order to comprise a representative. The interviews were semi-structured based on ten questions and aiming to confirm the data gathered with the mini-survey and the observations. More than that, they were used to expand on these findings with concrete information concerning the effects of the different technological tools and differentiation strategies on the particular types of learners.

* 1. **Research procedure**

The research comprised three phases: the pre-intervention, the intervention and the post intervention phase.

The first was the preparation stage when the two inventories (Student profile questionnaire and Harters’ Self-perception profile) where administered. The pre-assessment tests were also given to the students and all gathered data was used to plan the differentiated lessons.

The second stage was when the actual teaching of the vocabulary lessons took place. Data on learners’ motivation and engagement was collected through the observation procedure and students’ achievement and growth was assessed with the post-tests.

The post-intervention stage involved the administration of the mini-quiz and the conduct of the mini-interviews.

Due to the nature of data collected, which were more than one level (questionnaires, pre and post tests, interviews, observations) a multi-level analysis was deployed.

* 1. **Description of results**
     1. **Results of Student Profile Questionnaire**

The questionnaire given prior to intervention yielded results that clearly demonstrated the diversity of the group both in demographic and individual learning needs, styles and interests. It revealed considerable variety in learner needs and type of motivation (Figure 1). In particular, the target group’s motivation stemmed from pragmatic needs on the one hand and psychological needs on the other. Their instrumentally oriented motivation related to vocational reasons and personal achievement was quite high, namely 82,35% but even higher, 88,24% and 91,18% respectively, was their integrative motivational orientation related to personal enjoyment and their desire to communicate with other cultures (Sougari & Hovhannisyan, 2013).

Figure 1: Reasons for learning English

The dominant intelligences of the learners were also revealed. As it is depicted in Figure 2, the interpersonal intelligence was distinguished as the most prevalent (82%) while the smallest intelligent group was the intrapersonal. Finally, the visual and bodily/kinesthetic modalities are highly rated at 53% and 44% respectively while the traditional types, verbal and logical, are preferred by a minority of learners.

Figure 2: 4th grade learners’ intelligence preferences

**4.6.2 Results of the Self-Perception Report**

The chart in Figure 3 explicitly illustrates that although half of the class population feels confident about their scholastic competence, the other half displays feelings of inadequacy. Characteristically, 32% of the learners exhibit medium adequacy and an 18% display a low self esteem regarding their competence in school work. Individual data demonstrate that the latter are mostly struggling students and under achievers, a finding that is confirmed by a large number of researches which clearly indicate a cause and effect relation between low self-image and academic failure (Utley, 1986, Covington, 1989, Daniel and King, 1995).

Figure 3: 4th grade learners’ self-perception of scholastic competence

**4.6.3. Results of pre and post tests**

Analysis of the data gathered from the pre and post tests are presented separately for each differentiated unit and for each participant student showing their entry and exit points. The chart in Figure 4 compares the pre and post test results of each student in Lesson 1. It is evident that there is a great diversity in students’ prior knowledge ranging from 0 known words before the session to 9 known words from the 13 included in the test. The post test explicitly depicts an upward trajectory depending on the entry point of each learner. Some noteworthy increase is for below grade ST31 who increased vocabulary knowledge from 0 to 6 and for advanced learner ST5 from 6 to the top 13. Although these two students started from a total different terminus a quo they both covered a long distance; the first learned 6 words and the latter 7.

Figure 4: 4th grade learners’ results of pre and post test: Lesson 1

Lesson 2 yielded even more encouraging results although it was more demanding in terms of number of words taught, namely 18. Nonetheless, Figure 5 indicates the existence of very low entry points for this unit as well. Specifically, STs 17, 20, 28, 30,31,32,33 exhibit knowledge of the particular lexis which ranges from 0 to 5 items in the pre-test and the same learners exhibit a measurable increase ranging from 4 to 6 new words learnt. Similarly, students with high entry points, ST 2, ST11, ST 22 excel while students at grade level like ST5, ST6, ST7, ST21 exhibit a notable increase up to 8 new words learnt.

Figure 5: 4th grade learners’ results of pre and post test: Lesson 2

Results from Lesson 3 confirm previous data with the post test scores showing an increase against the pre-test ones (Figure 6). However, it is evident that the progress of certain learners is less encouraging than in Lesson 2.

Figure 6: 4th grade learners’ results of pre and post test: Lesson 3

Finally, Lesson 4 pre-test results indicate a low entry-point for almost all students which is a contrasting difference with the previous three vocabulary units (Figure 7). Almost all learners have the same starting point which ranges from 0 to 4 known words and all exemplify an upward direction in their performance.

Figure 7: 4th grade learners’ results of pre and post test: Lesson 4

**4.6.4. Results of the post-meant mini quiz**

As it can be seen in Figure 8, the rate of students who expressed their liking for the intervention was 88% which is verified by the 81% who expressed a strong desire to have more differentiated lessons. This demonstrates a strong positive relationship between the two variables.

Figure 8: 4th grade learners’ results of post-intervention survey

The opinions of the students for the activities employed were clearly positive. When asked to judge the effectiveness of technology in general, 82% reported that the use of multimedia was facilitative while 81% agreed that the differentiated lessons helped them understand the words better. Regarding the level of difficulty of the tasks, the majority, 88% in particular, did not find them overly demanding.

**4.6.5. Results of Observation and mini- interviews**

The overall impression of the vocabulary lessons was positive in terms of the levels of engagement and participation. All of the learners were reported to be engaged during the presentation stage especially when multimedia use was involved. The students were observed to watch, listen, repeat, or mime during the songs, videos and talking flashcards displaying complete engagement and interest. Regarding the effectiveness of the various differentiated strategies and activities, observation of the learners during the teaching/learning process but also feedback taken from the tasks sheets yielded encouraging results. The delivery of new content through different channels which was extensively used throughout the intervention phase was noted to have raised interest, ease frustration and keep learners’ attention span for longer than usual.

The mini-interviews confirmed the previous findings of the post- meant mini-quiz and the observation results. Specifically, all the respondents provided positive feedback expressing how much they liked the new teaching approach. It was also confirmed that the material used was at the right level for the whole spectrum of learners, that is, below grade, at grade level and advanced students.

**4.7. Discussion**

**4.7.1. Effects on learners’ achievements**

There is a noteworthy difference between the pre and post test scores of the learners. This rise in the number of words learned by the students is consistent throughout all four lessons which is very encouraging giving the researcher the right to conclude that differentiated instruction strategies have a positive impact on young learner’s understanding of newly taught vocabulary. This deduction is further supported by the observation results and mainly the students’ tasks which exemplify satisfactory understanding and assimilation of new material to a great extend.

Closer look at the results of each differentiated lesson leads to the inference that not all students demonstrate the same progress. Although some learners, mainly high and middle aptitude ones are depicted to thrive, certain learners display minor or moderate change. Explanation for this occurrence can be found in the limited duration of the intervention since during these few weeks, a successful implementation of differentiated strategies could have only a limited effect on students’ achievement.

**4.7.2. Effects on learners’ motivation**

The results reveal that disinterest is a disease that is not incurable and it can propose differentiation and educational technology as a treatment that can promote active learning and engagement. Specifically, in light of this survey, it can be deduced that the combination of differentiation and multimedia can affect students’ motivation levels positively by enhancing both affective and cognitive factors.

More specifically, certain parameters that contribute to high levels of motivation were identified during the observation phase and to a lesser extent during the mini-quiz and mini-interviews. In particular, the high degree of enthusiasm and involvement reported during the intervention are indicators of enhanced motivation and evidence that the approach and materials used tapped into learners’ interests and piqued their curiosity. As reported in the findings, the highest levels of enjoyment and engagement were during the use of technology tools. Such a conclusion agrees with research findings that technology integration can increase student motivation (Anderson, 2000) by adding interest and excitement and improving learners’ self-confidence in completing academic tasks (Brophy, 1983). Retaining pupils’ attention for a long time is a difficult task since young learners are characterized by a short attention span (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990) due to their underdeveloped meta-cognitive strategies.

**4.7.3. The impact of DI on advanced and struggling learners**

It is clear from the data that the students with high entry points excelled at all lessons even in Lesson 4 where their starting points were much lower. On the other hand, the below grade-level learners, that is, the ones earners can be considered mediocre, a phenomenon which can be attributed to the short duration of the intervention or even to the type of post-assessment used since a formative assessment could have yielded better results for these type of students.

This last realization is further supported by the learners’ written activities, especially the tiered ones, which showed a satisfactory use of newly acquired knowledge. What is certain, though, is the fact that learning was taking place in the differentiated classroom for all ability learners while the on-going assessment results can help the teacher modify aspects of his/her teaching to improve learners’ performance. It is worth noting at this point, that “the goal for each student is maximum growth from his current learning position” (Tomlinson, 2001, p.15), which means that the struggling learners of the study were moving towards this direction slowly but steadily.

**4.7.4. Educational technology can facilitate the implementation of differentiated strategies**

Even Tomlinson (1999) admits that differentiated instruction is complex to use and difficult to promote in schools while teacher/researchers such as Bondley (2011) admit feelings of frustration and weariness caused by the additional preparation for multiple lessons and student practices which increased their normal workload. Comparing such experiences with the experience gained from the current study the teacher can verify that preparing a differentiated lesson plan is strenuous work but she can also assert that technology can take a great burden off the teacher.

The internet can be relied upon to provide educators with a wealth of input in all kinds of modes even in multi modal forms accommodating the different abilities and learner profiles. Implementing differentiation of practice was also greatly assisted by the use of interactive online activities which gave immediate feedback to lower level students or provided more advanced learners with challenging tasks.

In general, the study manifests that educational technology allows educators to tailor curricula to individual learners quickly and effectively and ease the process of differentiating for student traits and abilities.

**5. Concluding remarks**

In accordance with most of the existing literature, the information gleaned from this study indicated a positive relationship between DI and students’ academic achievement and motivation. Specifically, it was proved that the use of differentiated strategies can enhance vocabulary learning of all types of learners, while ICTs can be relied upon to facilitate the process of differentiating by content, product and process. Although the study was context-bound and had a limited duration, it offered important insights and could open the road for more longitudinal researches in the field.

Although DI is not a panacea or a magic wand but a model complex to use and difficult to promote in schools (Tomlinson, 1999), it has been proved to be doable and effective, a model that has come here to stay. The necessity of the new approach is determined by today’s classroom reality characterized by a diverse population and their individual needs. As this transformation in schools and society evolves, effective teachers should use practices that accommodate rather than ignore variance in readiness, interest and learning profile. Therefore, the urgency to get familiar with DI and apply it in the classroom is more immediate than ever. The future of DI is inextricably linked with the integration of ICTs in the classroom routine due to the transformative power of both of them. Their combination can create a student-centered, interactive learning environment where diversity is honoured and all learners advance at their own pace.

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