

Methodological Aspects that Influence Differentiated Learning Instruction Implementation in a
5th Grade Group at I.E. San José in Itaguí.

Sebastián Corrales Betancur

Universidad de Antioquia

Thesis and Research Practicum Advisor

Marlon Vanegas Rojas

Medellín

June – 2019



Abstract

This is an action research report that presents the process and results obtained through the process. The purpose of this action research was to identify the methodological aspects that modify the implementation of differentiated learning instruction as a pedagogical approach to language teaching. The data for this research was collected through the use of journals, surveys and interviews. It was concluded that the methodological aspects that have important bearing in the implementation of differentiated learning instruction are maintaining engagement, the implementation of learning strategies, and the alteration of both teachers' and students' roles.

Key words: Differentiated learning, Differentiated instruction, Engagement, Elementary-grade instruction.

Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement for the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín, Colombia.

Acknowledgements

I would be remiss not to thank my research advisor, Marlon Vanegas, for his support and patience throughout the final stages of this research. Thanks to his cheerful nature and his patience to my many objections, I have been able to finish this research, as well as growing as a teacher in the process.

This paper is dedicated to everyone who has been with me through this 8 years long process: Family, friends, teachers, companions, and all of the people that, in one way or another, have changed me and made me improve as a person. Likewise, I would like to make a special mention to my cooperating teacher in the San José institution, who, in her own way has made me love the profession, and realize that teaching is not only a job, but a way of life. In addition, I would like to thank all of the students in the group that were like a big family, teaching me how to improve as a teacher in every step of the way.

Table of Contents

Preface	6
Description of the Context	8
Statement of the problem	10
Theoretical Background	11
Differentiated Learning Instruction in the EFL Classroom	11
Engagement	12
Research Question	13
General Objective	13
Specific Objectives	13
Action Plan	14
Development of Actions	16
Conclusions	21
Reflections	23
References	24

Preface

As a pre-service teacher, I was blessed with the opportunity to arrive in a classroom in which the cooperating teacher tries to improve the language teaching process for their students through using different strategies. However, the purported benefits of these strategies were not as readily apparent as they were supposed to be, according to the theory. This, I realized, was due to an apparent lack of engagement in the students of the classroom. By implementing differentiated teaching, I aimed to improve engagement, and modify the perceptions of the students in regards to the teachers and the language class.

This action research was developed in two phases. An observational and planning phase from July to November 2018. And an implementation and evaluation phase from February to June 2019. During the first phase, observations through the use of journals were done in order to identify the different characteristics of the classroom, including the cooperating teacher's beliefs, pedagogical foundations of the curriculum, classroom context and 5th graders' reactions to English class activities. As a result, I decided to focus my research project on differentiated instruction in order to foster engagement and meaningful learning through the design and implementation of English lessons based on the students' needs, likes and interests.

As for the second phase, an implementation of an action plan, and the design of some instruments for data collection including surveys and interviews was conducted to help answer the research question. Thanks to all of these steps, findings and interpretations were consolidated, which led to the drawing of final conclusions and reflections that emerged from the development of the project. Hopefully, this action research project may become beneficial for

the readers interested in getting to know more about differentiated instruction and engagement which may help students in English classes at public schools.

Description of the Context

I.E. San José's main building is located next to the "Pilsen" round-point, with several other factories surrounding it, as well as a gas station. However, this research took place at the John F. Kennedy institution, located six blocks away from the "Pilsen" round-point due to construction efforts in I.E. San José's main building being undergone. I.E. John F. Kennedy's main building is comprised of thirty classrooms, three computer rooms, one of which is for public use, a library, two sets of bathrooms, two teacher lounges, and two administrative rooms.

I.E. San José's mission, as translated from the official documents, states "Inclusive education with thoughts in action that transform both the being and the society". Its vision states that "An educational institution of excellence with integral management that is projected towards professionalization and development". Institutional values include: learning to be, love to serve and share with others, responsibility for conviction and organization, and respect for human dignity. Lastly, their pedagogical model, as stated in their I.E.P. is "self-structuring with a constructivist focus".

The classroom was located in the right wing of the building, on the third floor. There were decorations inside the classroom with topics that included student birthdays, and the alphabet in English, among others. While entering the classroom you face the teacher's desk and a window directly. The whiteboard on the left, and on the back right, two other windows. The students organized in six rows looking at the whiteboard. The students who were the main subjects of this action-research, group 5-2 that was comprised of 32 female students. Their strata ranges from 2-3, and their views towards English class vary greatly, from being one of the favorite subjects of some to being the subject that some of them dread.

The cooperating teacher, or CT, for this action research who was Ana Clara Monsalve. She is a teacher with twenty-four years of experience, graduated from a “normalista” institution and with a bachelor’s degree in education for special needs. She was teaching English for fourth and fifth grades in the institution. As for her beliefs in regards to English teaching, she believes in language learning through listening and repetition, abilities which eventually lead to writing. This appears to be in line with the audio-lingual method. In regards to the students, the teacher says that students, specially kids, are like sponges, and the role of the teacher is to guide them and find their motivations to present them with activities that engage them in learning, expecting them to be inquisitive, participative, and for them to develop their own learning by giving them opportunities to participate and explore. Some of the previous aspects can be more readily seen than others.

Statement of the problem

The focus for this research is on differentiated learning instruction and the methodological factors that affect its implementation. This focus was decided upon through observations of a 5th grade group in which differentiated teaching strategies were being used. The reason for which this focus was decided upon are that throughout the observation journals there are situations in which the purported benefits of differentiated teaching are not showing as expected. These include various activities in which the different learning styles of the students are being catered to, and yet, meaningful learning is not being achieved, or at least proof of it in the students' output is not clear. Activities such as the making of posters, spelling bees, and others are not showing the expected outcomes/output by the students, as exemplified in the journal entry on August 1st, 2018, where students, despite being in the middle of an activity that could potentially be directed towards their different learning styles, making posters in groups, show signs of disengagement, which leads most of the groups to produce subpar outcomes. This point is further supported by journal entry on August 22nd, 2018, wherein the students' lack of engagement towards strategies that make use of hearing or visual stimuli such as songs and videos is shown.

Theoretical Background

The concepts that are the most prominent in this research are Differentiated Instruction in the EFL Classroom, and Engagement. These concepts, although broad, have generated discussion in the teaching profession for some time. Thanks to the expansive previous research on both of these concepts, I was able to get clarity and give direction to my research, which is why it is important to expand on them here.

Differentiated Learning Instruction in the EFL Classroom

Differentiated learning instruction is defined as a pedagogical approach which supports that teachers should modify the content that is being taught to fit the specific needs of the students Tomlinson as mentioned by Chen and Chen (2018). Wu (2012) sustains that by using differentiated learning instruction, “teachers can adjust the teaching content, progress and evaluation methods according to individual differences and needs of the students, so as to enhance students’ learning effect and guide students’ adaptive development” (as noted by Chen, J. and Chen, Y. 2018). The role of the teacher in a classroom that uses this pedagogical approach is that of a creator, facilitator and guide through different activities suited to the needs of the students. Teachers that mean to use this approach should recognize that students have different abilities, interests, readiness, learning styles, and personalities, and adapt to them by using differentiated instruction strategies (Levy, 2008). Through the use of differentiated learning instruction in this research, it was my objective to foster an environment that allowed for students’ engagement to be in the spotlight.

Engagement

Skinner, Kindermann, Marchand and Furrer (2008) define engagement as the quality of students' participation or connection with the schooling endeavour and hence with activities, values, people, goals, and place that comprise it, as such, in the language context, engagement is the effort and quality of the student's endeavours towards learning the language. Because of the nature of engagement, it has various effects in the development of students' learning process, improving the quality as well as the outcomes of the process. Liem and Chong (2017) found the fact that a group of students whose engagement levels were higher than those of their peers reportedly achieved higher grades noteworthy, implying that engagement has a direct effect in students' grades and process. When engaging a student in an activity, one must bear in mind the purported stage of language development in which students are located, in this case, the early production stage, and plan activities such as those suggested by Haynes, J. (2005) accordingly.

These concepts lead us to the main research question of this research: What methodological aspects modify the implementation of differentiated learning instruction in a group of 5th graders at I.E. San José?

Research Question

What methodological aspects influence the implementation of differentiated learning instruction in a group of 5th graders at I.E. San José?

General Objective

To identify the methodological aspects that influence the implementation of differentiated learning instruction in a group of 5th graders

Specific Objectives

- Identify the effects different methodological aspects have on the implementation of differentiated learning instruction (Journal)
- Define the influence differentiated learning instruction has on students' engagement and meaningful learning (Survey)
- Analyze the influence a public school context has on the implementation of differentiated learning instruction (Interview)

Action Plan

The action plan for the first and second school terms has been designed bearing in mind the strategies for language acquisition stages proposed by Haynes (2005), and the output principle presented by Ellis, R. (2005). Additionally, the school syllabus and the Basic Learning Rights presented by the National Ministry of Education were considered, as it is important to incorporate vocabulary, development of social skills, and topics that are required for the students to accomplish the objectives set by the institution and the MEN. This is done through the use of strategies for the encouragement of early production, and fostering of engagement such as charades, linguistic guessing games, and role-plays, amongst others.

In summary, the focus of the activities to be developed is making use of comprehensible meaningful input, fostering engagement and output from the students. Moreover, it is also important to contemplate the strategies such as establishing routines for the English class, small group activities, setting examples of ideal outcomes and introducing the use of self-regulatory strategies.

The data collection instruments for this study will be observations, an interview with the cooperating teacher and a closure survey for the students:

- Observations: Observing and describing what happens during the class provides the student-teacher with elements to reflect about the reaction of students after input is given to them, or changes are introduced to the class. The categories to go deeper into the analysis are *Differentiated learning* (use of meaningful activities, use of language learning strategies), *Characteristics of differentiated learning* (Engagement/involvement, Teacher/students roles) *Constraints and benefits of differentiated learning* (Educational policies and demands, time allotted). These

observations are collected systematically, documented and analyzed after every class.

- Interview: At the final stages of the process, an interview will be conducted with the Cooperating Teacher, in order for her to both consider the effects that the actions developed on class have had, and the constraints that she has observed in using this pedagogical approach. This will be done in order to reflect on the process, as well as obtain an outside view of the implementation of such a pedagogical approach.
- Closure survey: At the end of the process students will fill a survey to express how much they liked the class activities, how difficult the activities were, how much did they learn and how their engagement levels were altered. This instrument gives the student-teacher direct access to student's opinion about the English class and the pedagogical approach after the process is over.

Development of Actions

Throughout this process, several actions were developed in order to achieve the objectives set for this research. First, the action plan had to be developed, then the interview had to be conducted, and finally the survey had to be implemented. This process was not without its constraints, and at the end of this section, we shall explore them as well.

The action plan included the bulk of the activities and strategies to be developed in class. The activities and strategies stipulated in this action plan were successfully implemented. These activities included role-plays, group works, readings, and the making of multiple crafts in class using the target language. The action plan was ultimately successful in providing the evidences needed to answer the question central to this research, as well as attaining the objectives set. It was developed from February through April, 2019. Second, the survey had as its main purpose acknowledging the point of view of the students in regards to the activities developed in the classroom. As such, it included questions that focused on the engagement level of the students, their views on the strategies applied in class, and the opinions they had in regards to the pedagogical approach. The survey was conducted on Monday, April 8th, 2019 with a total of thirty-one students taking part in it. Finally, the interview with the teacher, which took place on Thursday, April 18th, 2019, provided the point of view of the cooperating teacher in regards to the implementation of the action plan, as well as her opinions on the approach and its constraints.

The constraints that affected the implementation of these actions were time constraints caused by the educational policies and demands of both the ministry of education as well as the English curriculum.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

In order to analyze and interpret the data gathered, a triangulation of the data collection instruments was conducted taking into account the journals, the survey and the interview. The analysis of this data has as a focus answering to the main research question, as well as the objectives set for the research. Thanks to this analysis, we could say that the elements that are the most influential for this research are those mentioned in the categories for the analysis, namely meaningful activities, language learning strategies, engagement and involvement, and teacher and students' roles. As such, the importance of each of these shall be expanded upon.

I found that meaningful activities have an overall positive effect on the implementation of differentiated learning instruction, not only because the students feel connected with the activities but also because their interest was maintained. This can be evidenced when student (#9) mentioned that “Yes, because they call my attention, I like them a lot, and they make it easier to learn” (Student survey, April 8th, 2019) when asked if she felt a connection with the activities and topics developed in English class. In the same sense, student # 17 affirmed that, “I am silent, listening to whoever speaks, in order to learn and develop the activities easily” (student survey, April 8th, 2019) when asked if she could maintain a certain level of interest in the activities and made an effort to pay attention to the teacher and her classmates. On the other side, the cooperating teacher asserted “It [the positive effects of differentiated learning instruction] is very evident, because there is widespread student participation because of the motivation they show when being in accordance with the proposals brought by the teacher” (CT interview excerpt, April 18th, 2019). According to Turner, Solis and Kincade (2017), “When used by instructors, this teaching strategy (use of meaningful activities) promotes engagement, facilitates motivation, and helps students make the connection with what is being taught in the

classroom to the things they value outside of class” (p.3). So, it can be interpreted that students feel that the activities relate to their lives at a personal level creates a connection between the students, the topics and the activities developed in class, giving as a result an increase in motivation.

I found that the implementation and giving of directions to students in regards to language learning strategies helps them learn in a more effective way that is catered to each student’s specific learning style, aiding the development of both group work as well as individual tasks and the overall development of the class. Evidence for this can be found in the interview with the CT, in which she mentions that these strategies “...promote autonomous work, and give good results”, (interview excerpt, April 18th, 2019). Also, in the survey implemented on the students, specifically in question number 6, students have expressed that they believe that the focus on their individual differences in learning styles and strategies has had a positive effect on their learning process. A study which focused in language learning strategies used by 418 Taiwanese EFL learners seems to have found similar results, showing that “It was observed that proficiency level had a significant effect on strategy choice and use. The conclusion was that more proficient learners used more learning strategies” p.2 (as mentioned by Erdogan, 2018). It is important to mention that one of the benefits of differentiated learning instruction is that it promotes autonomous learning and language learning strategies development, while providing positive academic results. In addition to this, it can also be said that the students consider activities that bear in mind their individual needs as well as their companions’ to be helpful in their language learning process.

In this research, it was found that engagement and involvement with the different activities and topics developed in class helped the students in their learning process as well as their academic performance, and the teacher in the development of their class. Proof of this is that when students

were involved in the activities and found them engaging, not only was it easier for the teacher to teach the topics and implement the activities, but also discipline during these activities was easier to maintain. During the interview, the Ct had two bits of evidence to support this, as she mentions that “student participation is widespread due to the motivation that they (the students) show when in accordance to the activities brought forth by the teacher”, as well as that “motivation and engagement with their learning process is evident in each of the students”, (interview excerpts, April 18th, 2019). In the theory, this is supported by Liem and Chong (2017), as they mention that “... motivation which then gave rise to their behavioral engagement which in turn led to academic achievement” p.7. It can be inferred of the results of question number 4 of the survey, which concerned students’ engagement with the activities in class that the students enjoy the activities developed during English class, which involves them in the class and topics developed. This evidence supports that students feel that they can engage in class through participation, which gives them the opportunity to involve themselves in the topics and activities in class improving their academic performance.

Throughout this research, it was found that the teacher’s role in the classroom as a guide to knowledge affected students’ roles as inquisitive, attentive learners, and vice-versa. These slight changes in the roles that originated in the pedagogical approach affected the behaviour of the students in regards to their responsibilities in the classroom as well as their view of responsibility in regards to their learning process. The Cooperating teacher supports this point by mentioning that “On the teacher’s part there was an immediate connection with the group, the students were quick in noticing that there was something different, a new proposal, and they gave their all as a response” (Interview excerpt, April 18th, 2019). Alonazi (2017) suggests that “by changing their traditional role to the role of an organizer or facilitator, teachers help their students to be more

responsible for their own learning.” p.2. This supports that the relationship that the teacher forms with the students favors the implementation of differentiated learning instruction as well as engagement and participation in the class.

Conclusions

What methodological aspects influence the implementation of differentiated learning instruction in a group of 5th graders at I.E. San José?

Considering that my research question was focused on identifying the methodological aspects that influence the implementation of differentiated learning instruction, I could say that engagement and meaningful activities are central. Through the use of this pedagogical approach, engagement can be easily maintained thanks to the attention given to individual differences. In addition to this, this approach also fosters autonomous learning in the students, that is, students were able to make their own decisions in regards to the learning strategies that best suited their individual learning styles, improving their academic performance in the process. Moreover, the role the teacher plays in order to implement such a methodology is crucial, since he or she should be sensitive to students needs and involvement with the activities and topics developed.

In regards to the specific objectives of the research, it could be concluded that different methodological aspects that are most important in the implementation of differentiated learning instruction are the ones previously mentioned, as their effects cannot be underestimated. Differentiated learning instruction, when implemented with a correct handling of these methodological aspects has a remarkable effect on students' engagement and learning, as it makes it easier for meaningful learning opportunities to be present throughout the class. The context in which differentiated learning instruction is applied also has an effect on its implementation, since in this pedagogical approach the quantity of the students affects both the activities and the strategies that can be implemented.

To expand on the previous point, it is worth mentioning that during the implementation of differentiated learning instruction in a public context, some constraints showed up, refraining the

total development of the activities and strategies carried out. These constraints included time allotted for the language classes, the quantity of topics that had to be covered in this time, and the amount of classes lost due to different factors regarding the context of the institution. The time allotted for English class was constraining due to it being reduced to 3 hours per week, limiting the activities that could be developed. The action plan was also affected due to the amount of topics to be developed, which required the complete attention of the teacher, leaving little room for differentiated activities to be developed. All of these factors were also amplified by the amount of hours of class lost due to different institutional and cultural events that crossed paths with the class, things such as holidays and institutional days made it difficult to maintain constancy in the class, and this affected the implementation of this approach negatively. However, the main constraint for the implementation of differentiated activities is disengagement, as if engagement is not maintained, the development of the classes and topics, as well as the learning process of the students are negatively affected.

It is recommended for any other teachers interested in starting a research such as this one, that they must be aware of the time that this kind of approach demands throughout the process. This means that both the amount of topics and the time allotted for the development of activities should be kept in close regard, as these were the most influential constraints for the duration of the research. Depending on the level of the learners, a strategy that includes instruction solely in foreign language could also be detrimental, as foreign concepts that escape the level of the students by a good margin could also negatively affect engagement or involvement with the activities. Because of this, a mixed language approach is recommended, as well as the role of the teacher being set to that of the guide to and not the center of knowledge in order for the instruction to be most effective.

Reflections

In a personal level, this research helped me improve as a person. Not only did it help me become more responsible, but also boosted my motivation for being a language teacher. Moreover, through doing this research several questions regarding my objectives as a person were raised, and many were left unanswered, leaving room for me to grow even more. Also, the proximity to children reminded me that every problem that can present itself in life can be overcome with joy, innocence, and a warm smile.

In a professional level, not only has this experience broadened my scope in teaching, but it has also challenged me to improve at each step. In the beginning, I was unsure and unwilling to teach such an amount of students, especially at their age, but as the time passed, I found myself eager for the next class. After some time, I began questioning what my path as an educator was, and what were the factors in me that affected my practice, and I found out that my apprehension to teaching these students in the beginning was due to my fear of failing them as a teacher. In time, this fear may go away, leaving me free to enjoy teaching at its fullest, but I sincerely hope that it stays with me for as long as possible, because it is this same fear which inspires me to improve.

As a researcher, the opportunity to develop field work cannot be underappreciated. It has showed me that a research can be conducted as long as the researcher is willing to sacrifice time in order to satiate curiosity. And it was this same curiosity that I will be aiming to satiate in the future. I have yet to improve on my methods and my data gathering techniques, but I am willing to keep improving.

References

- Alonazi, S. M. (2017). *The Role of Teachers in Promoting Learner Autonomy in Secondary Schools in Saudi Arabia*. English Language Teaching Journal, 10, 183-202.
- Chen, J. and Chen, Y. (2018). *Differentiated Instruction in a Calculus Curriculum for College Students in Taiwan*. Journal of Education and Learning, Vol. 7. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1157922.pdf>
- Ellis, R. (2005). *Principles of Instructed Language Learning*. Asian EFL Journal, September 2005. Retrieved from http://asian-efl-journal.com/sept_05_re.pdf
- Erdogan, T. (2018). *The Investigation of Self-Regulation and Language Learning Strategies*. Universal Journal of Educational Research, 6, 1477-1485.
- Haynes, J. (2005). *Teach to Students' Learning Styles*.
<http://www.everythingsl.net/inservices/learningstyle.php>
- I.E. San José's English Curriculum. Retrieved from
https://media.master2000.net/menu/222/3273/mper_arch_27212_Ingles.pdf
- I.E. San José's I.E.P.. Translated from
<https://issuu.com/calidadsanjo/docs/pei2019?idmenutipo=3273>
- I.E. San José's Mision. Translated from
https://media.master2000.net/menu/222/636/mper_arch_9407_TELEOLOGIA19.pdf

I.E. San José's Vision. Translated from

https://media.master2000.net/menu/222/636/mper_arch_9407_TELEOLOGIA19.pdf

Ministry of Education (MEN) curricular guidelines. Retrieved from

http://www.colombiaaprende.edu.co/sites/default/files/naspublic/colombiabilingu/dbcurriculo/cartillas_mallas_aprendizaje/Mallas%20de%20Aprendizaje.pdf

Levy, H. M. (2008). *Meeting the Needs of All Students Through Differentiated Instruction: Helping Every Child Reach and Exceed Standards*. The Cleaning House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, 81, 161-164.

<https://doi.org/10.3200/TCHS.81.4.161-164>

Liem, G. A. D., and Chong, W. H. (2017). *Fostering Student Engagement in Schools: International Best Practices*. School Psychology International, 38, 121-130.

Skinner, E., Kindermann, T., Marchand, G., and Furrer, C. (2008). *Engagement and Disaffection in the Classroom: Part of a Larger Motivational Dynamic?*. Journal of Educational Psychology, 100, 765-781. Retrieved from

<http://www.web.pdx.edu/~thomas/Research/Skinner%20Furrer%20Marchand%20Kindermann%202008%20jep.pdf>

Turner, W. D., Solis, O. J., and Kincade, D. H. (2017). *Differentiating Instruction for Large Classes in Higher Education*. International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 29, 490-500.

Wu, Q.S. (2012). *Differentiated Instruction and Students' learning*. National Institute of

Education Newsletter, 38. Retrieved from <http://english.nies.net.cn/>