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Identifying Opportunities and Challenges on Vocabulary Learning within Differentiated Instruction

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Abstract

This action-research aimed at identifying opportunities and challenges that differentiated instruction could bring to vocabulary learning of a heterogeneous class. It was conducted in a public school in La Ceja, Antioquia with 34 second graders. Action strategies included the promotion of station rotation, the exploration of students' most prevalent learning styles, and the evaluation of student's vocabulary. Data gathering instruments included teacher's journal, vocabulary tests, questionnaires, a focus group, students' artifacts, and interviews. Findings revealed an increased in the amount of students' range of vocabulary and started developing multiple strategies to continue learning the language. On the other hand, the lack of familiarity in the matter of differentiated instructions, participant's demographics and external factors hindered the development of actions.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, heterogeneous class, vocabulary learning, learning styles

Degree requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement to obtain a bachelor's degree in foreign language education (English- French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

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Finally, I want to express my gratefulness to my closest friends and my partner that walked with me this whole way and were and continue to be people that encouraged me to always be better, to try my best, and to be the happy person that I really am.

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Preface

I am a student of foreign languages teaching program from a public university in Antioquia, Colombia. I am a teacher interested in learning more about the different strategies that can be used to teach varied type of students. The desire to undertake this research arose from my initial remarks on the student's vocabulary and my willingness for researching and writing on issues in the EFL context after a remote education during the pandemic. This research study was carried out from late January to late November in 2022. As a pre-service teacher, I conducted the project in a public school in La Ceja, Antioquia and the target group for this research study was composed of 34 second graders from a rural public school in La Ceja, Antioquia. This paper is aimed primarily at EFL teachers who are interested in promoting vocabulary acquisition in their classrooms, as well as in fostering a learning process centered on the needs and interests of their students.

Juan Camilo Suarez Areiza

La Ceja, Antioquia, December 15th, 2022

Description of the Context

The institution where this action research project was carried out is a branch building of a public school of La Ceja Del Tambo (Antioquia, Colombia). The institution offers education to students from preschool to 8th grade in a co-educational form. Its mission is educating boys, girls, and teens with a humanistic perspective, developing a life project based on respect and coexistence values that make the student a competent society member. As for the vision, by the year 2020, the institution would stand out for its contribution to pedagogical innovation and interaction with the community, as the foundation of critical awareness, autonomy, creativity, and tolerance, which must characterize the new citizens (School Code of Conduct Manual, 2014).

Concerning the class, it was a second grade English class taught one time a week in 90-minute periods, though schedules can vary. The class syllabus was based upon the *Mallas de Aprendizaje de Inglés: Para Transición a 5° de Primaria* from the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN, 2016), which provided the general guidelines for the whole school year. The contents for this class included the appropriation and use of basic vocabulary such as greetings, colors, animals, numbers, and personal information, among others.

Participants in this study included 34 students whose ages ranged between 6 and 10, and most of them lived in the urban area of La Ceja. Most of students' English proficiency level was basic and their exposure to English was limited as many of them stated on the questionnaire that during the pandemic they were distracted or had some problems to attend all the English classes. Also, some of them mentioned that "their parents or siblings did the homework for them", and a couple students wrote that "the assignments they had were too difficult to understand" (Students' Questionnaire, April 6th, 2022). Regarding my cooperating teacher, she holds a bachelor's

degree in education and a specialization in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Application for Teaching. She had been teaching for 24 years, and she had been teaching at the institution since 2006 where she had taught classes in all areas to all elementary grades. She believes that teaching is a lifestyle that she dreamed of since she was little. She thinks that all pedagogical practices and tendencies have something to contribute, but she identifies with dialogic pedagogy (Cooperating Teacher Interview, April 12th, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

There is no doubt the COVID-19 pandemic had great effects on most people's everyday life. Even more so when a lot of the systems for health, economy, or in our case education, were not prepared for the spontaneity of the situation. This led to the improvisation of aspects such as classes modality and activities applied using Information Communications and Technology tools (ICT). These are now demanding immediate actions to aid students' English learning, to think and investigate about new methods and strategies to address the needs of this new reality, and most specifically, to help students adapt and thrive in face-to-face English classes with all the problematics that the pandemic implied for language learning.

Due to the remote education given and received during the COVID-19 pandemic, students from the second grade showed to be very heterogeneous. Some students had a basic English level in comparison to other students that had developed the language skills expected for this grade or even more than that. And based on observations, having a heterogeneous group can render the class a less appropriate place for students of all levels and abilities to learn and acquire the language. For example, I was able to identify that some students were able to write and say some greetings and basic numbers that fit the objectives for second graders, in contrast to many

other students that were not able to. This issue was registered on my observations' descriptions and quote "some of the Ss are missing a lot of vocabulary and structures in English, whereas some others prove to have a more advanced level, and even tell me that they have had private classes" (Journal Entry, April 18th, 2022).

Based on my observations, discussions with my Cooperating Teacher, and questionnaire applied to the students, two prominent issues surfaced. On the one hand, many students lacked the expected vocabulary knowledge; on the other, they had issues with pronunciation and with grammar structures during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Journals, Entry March 2nd, 16th, 30th, April 6th, 20th, 27th and Questionnaire, April 6th, 2022). To this, Kartushina et al. (2021) argue that:

Children who had less passive screen exposure during lockdown showed larger gains in their expressive, but not receptive, vocabulary size. Second, children whose caregivers read more to them during lockdown showed larger gains in their receptive, but not expressive, vocabulary size. (p.2)

These elements were evident in class, as students that did not have much interaction with both class activities and caregivers during the pandemic, therefore they acquired less vocabulary. In fact, students have mentioned mastering truly little vocabulary, and when asked the words they knew in English only a few were able to say multiple words they remembered from their remote classes' vocabulary such as "like, dog, cat, chicken," while "many others didn't answer a single word or repeated the word they heard others say" (Students' Questionnaire, April 6th, 2022).

Furthermore, I could identify that some students had developed the expected skills for their grade or even more than their peers, and thus, the whole class process got more difficult for

both teachers and students as the more skilled students tended to finish doing class activities faster, getting bored and distracted easier. And on the other hand, less skilled students took longer, getting frustrated or discouraged to continue with the activities, which meant that some students' processes were privileged, while lowering the possibilities of other students developing their full potential. As Wang, Z. (2013) expressed "...high and medium level ability students benefit more in homogeneous groups, but low-level ability students benefit more in heterogeneous groups" (p.3).

Additionally, class activities finishing time can lead to some problems like bullying or discrimination against students that do not fit the standard of finishing fast, as well as, having feelings of frustration or unfairness with the class. For example, in one of the classes, one student desperate to continue insisted on continuing the activity remarking that it was too easy up to the point that she started mocking other students telling them that they were stupid or dumb.

In conclusion, the enlarged heterogeneity in the level of language skills seemed to impose extra difficulties for both the teacher and the students in the English classroom. Consequently, the implementation of differentiated strategies on aspects of the classes such as instructions or types of products, can contribute to the improvement of vocabulary acquisition and students' awareness of the different avenues to learn, being a type of instruction that tries to provide each student with the tools, resources, and motivation that fosters their learning process and capacities.

Theoretical Background

In this section, I first provide some context regarding the problems and difficulties in education of languages posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, I present on Vocabulary Development and Assessment, specifying the use of a modified version of the Vocabulary

Knowledge Scale (VKS). Then, I introduce the notion of language, most specifically, English vocabulary learning strategies. Finally, I discuss the use and importance of differentiation in process and product in a heterogeneous English second language classroom.

To begin with, it is important to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected students' regular cycle of going to school and process of learning English carried on the classes. With school closures and remote learning coming as fast and as suddenly as it came, the educational system had to quickly adapt to all these changes while addressing the new challenges and needs that the students had during this crisis. Thereafter, experts tried to identify the problematics related to the changes that the pandemic implied. Hartshorn et al. (2020) for example, argue that "students and teachers also perceived a similar 'somewhat negative' effect on their learning and teaching of English" (p.145), and what could be more alarming from the student's point of view is that students viewed the effect on their English learning with a more negative perception in comparison to the teachers' perception of the pandemic's effect on their teaching.

Further research conducted by Kwakye et al. (2021) explains, based on the evidence from national diagnostic testing results, how students have also decreased their grades during the pandemic education in comparison with scores from previous years. "Results for reading and math tests suggest that a greater proportion of students started the 2020-2021 school year with below grade level placement scores than in previous years" (p. 6). Moreover, they argue that this type of problematic was not a generalized matter, and it was highly dependent of the student context, mentioning that "English Language Learners (ELL), low-income students, and students with disabilities all had higher rates of students receiving a failing grade than their counterparts" (p.7). In our context, it meant that the disparities and heterogeneity of the classroom just kept

getting worse, leaving a bigger challenge for the post-pandemic education as it was also mentioned in Kwakye et al. (2021, p. 12) when they say that “the disruption in education may also worsen inequities” where “low-income students are less likely to receive quality remote instruction and are projected to experience significantly more lost learning than their peers”. Henceforth, the need to promote activities and strategies that diminish the disparity of students’ language learning process.

Regarding vocabulary, defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a sum or stock of words employed by a language, group, individual, or work or in a field of knowledge” (Vocabulary. n.d.), as the base knowledge or skill to determine the students’ language development. As is proposed by Zimmerman (1998, p.5) “vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner”, I decided that Vocabulary Development would be my unit of analysis for this research. Besides, it would be more productive and less time demanding to focus my attention on the way students learn and make use of vocabulary in English rather than to pay attention to each fundamental skill or structure, as in the famous words of Wilkins (1972) “...while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (pp. 111–112).

Indeed, careful attention and analysis of Vocabulary Development also implies an adequate use of learning strategies, assessment and follow-up protocols and tools with all types of students, just as it is stated by Read (2000, pp.1-2) “vocabulary can be seen as a priority area in language teaching, requiring tests to monitor the learner’s progress in vocabulary learning and to assess how adequate their vocabulary knowledge is to meet their communication needs.”

To measure the amount of students’ vocabulary to see if there was any improvement or increase in the size and understanding, I intended to use a modified version of the Vocabulary

Knowledge Scale (VKS) which is a 5-point self-report scale developed by Wesche and Paribakht (1993), that according to Brown (2008) “allows students to indicate how well they know items of vocabulary. It measures small gains in knowledge to compare the effectiveness of different vocabulary instructional techniques.” In this sense, this tool will provide highly valuable information regarding how much receptive and productive vocabulary the students had, before and after the implementation of the project.

Another consideration is the importance of language learning strategies in the vocabulary acquisition, which could be any kinds of plans, actions, tactics, or ideas which language learners maximize to help them to facilitate the memorization, comprehension, analysis, and use of information. Nation (2001) for example, believes that since “learners differ greatly in the skill with which they use strategies. For these reasons, it is important to make training in strategy use a planned part of a vocabulary development program” (p. 222). I followed Nation’s taxonomy strategies (2001) which, continuing with Bastanfar’s (2010) clarification, are:

Planning involves choosing where and how to focus attention on the vocabulary item and contains strategies for choosing words, choosing aspects of word knowledge and choosing strategies as well as planning repetition. Sources involve finding information about the word from the word form itself, from the context, from a reference source like dictionaries or glossaries and from analogies and connections with other languages.

Process means establishing word knowledge through noticing, retrieving and generating strategies. (pp. 160-161)

Concerning the differentiation in instruction in education, which is defined by Convery (1993) as “the entitlement of every learner to have his/her individual needs and abilities catered for, and the teacher’s responsibility to find effective ways of managing those needs and abilities

and to match them to appropriate teaching and learning styles” (p.7), this project was mostly dedicated to two essential parts of differentiation in the classroom. On the one hand, *differentiation in process* refers to activities and tasks that students engage in to further understand a concept or practice a skill. According to Wang (2019, July) “Successful process differentiation involves providing various visual, auditory, and written activities to match the learning styles of each student. Additionally, teachers may provide differing levels of support based on the student’s learning ability.” On the other hand, *differentiation in product* that considers the work or result that students are asked to have at the end of the unit or curriculum, demonstrating what they learned and their mastery of the content. As specified by Wang (2019, July) “providing students with different avenues to demonstrate their knowledge based on their interest and learning style helps students engage more with their project”. Thus, allowing students to better display their understanding and knowledge of the English language.

Consequently, it is crucial to understand that “this approach to effective instruction of heterogeneous student populations [...] suggests that teachers concentrate on two classroom factors: the nature of the student and the essential meaning of the curriculum” (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 6); which essentially means that if we knew who we were teaching to, and what we were teaching, then we were more prone to have a deeper consideration with the way how we teach and assess, ultimately providing students with different possibilities to acquire contents, to process the new ideas that came with the vocabulary, and to develop products so that each student could learn effectively.

Research Question

What opportunities and challenges can differentiation in process and product bring to English vocabulary learning for a heterogeneous second graders class in post-pandemic times?

General Objective

To analyze the opportunities and challenges that differentiation in process and product can bring to vocabulary learning for a heterogeneous group of 2nd English language learners in post-pandemic times.

Specific Objectives

1. To determine if the strategy of class differentiation can facilitate vocabulary acquisition in a heterogeneous group.
2. To explore how differentiation in product contributes to the English vocabulary development of second graders.
3. To evaluate the opportunities differentiation in process can bring to students in post-pandemic times in terms of language acquisition.
4. To examine the challenges that students can experience when working with differentiation in process and product.

Action Plan

Four actions were developed to address the question stated for this research project. The first action was the implementation of a vocabulary knowledge scale -one at the beginning and one near the end- to understand the student's English level and amount of vocabulary. The second action was the application of a Likert-type questionnaire about learning styles -one at the beginning and one near the end-, and a checklist aiming to determine the more prevalent learning styles amongst the students. The third action was divided in four stages: (a) a general presentation of what differentiated instruction is; (b) drills with differentiated instructions; (c)

independent work, students were given more freedom to select the activities; and (d) station cards were created, and station leaders were assigned to provide further avenues. Finally, the fourth action consisted of a class discussion to gather final conclusions.

Data was collected through memos, students' artifacts, video recordings, audio recordings, questionnaires, tests, a checklist and one focus group. These aimed at evidencing students' understanding of the dynamic of the classes, identifying their vocabulary level, characterizing their learning styles, as well as recognizing their perceptions, and recommendations about the process; and comparing learning progress.

Development of Actions

I developed four teaching and research actions. The first one was the implementation of a modified version of the vocabulary knowledge scale (VKS) (see vocabulary tests and results [here](#)). This test was applied at the beginning and at the end of the project, to understand what the student's level was at that point so the activities and materials were tailored towards, as suggested by Read (2000), to monitor the learner's progress in terms of vocabulary so their communication needs were met; and, to gather final conclusions about the success of the whole project.

The second action consisted in determining the more prevalent learning styles among the students to develop subsequent activities. For this, I first applied a Likert type of questionnaire (see questionnaires [here](#)) based on Neil Fleming's VARK model (1987), where the students answered coloring a face (1. red= angry face, 2. yellow= serious face, 3. green= happy face) for each one of the statements that was divided into three distinct categories: Visual, Auditory, and

Kinesthetic. I was able to identify that, during the implementation of the questionnaire, some students were not coloring only one of the faces for each statement or that some students colored a face with the color that corresponded to another face. I repeated the instruction and most of the students corrected their mistakes. However, some questionnaires were invalid because answers were not possible to be identified. Another part of this action was the development of a checklist (see checklist [here](#)); I handed in a checklist to my CT with the name of all the students, and different items to categorize students' leaning styles. I compared these results with the results of the questionnaire to better identify which students were going to belong to which station.

The third action was an introductory activity related to the strategy of differentiated instruction. The aim was to establish a differentiated instruction in the use of a station rotation strategy, to make students aware of theories about learning styles. First, following Nation's (2001) comments on the importance training in strategy use, I provided an explanation on what the station rotation was, and that each was addressed to diverse types of learners according to the results of the questionnaire. Then, I explained the dynamic of the station rotation, there were going to be three different stations (Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic) with three different activities. For that reason, I insisted that they had to be very attentive to what type of activity they had to do in the station they were in, and that whenever they heard me playing the flute they had to go to the next station.

The second stage consisted of making a drill of the way students were going to organize the stations, and then, I directed the first classes where differentiated instruction took place. I planned the classes considering the school's syllabus. Then, I divided the students into three different stations, and I played the flute every time they had to rotate to the next station; aiming at providing the students with different avenues to demonstrate their knowledge based on their

interest and learning, as it was proposed by Wang (2019), so they were more engaged with the project. Some students demonstrated to really like the use of this strategy and performed better in one station or the other as was expected, whereas other students showed to feel less motivated to actively participate in either of the stations.

For the third stage I gave more freedom to students but still managed times and other aspects of the rotations. I still planned and directed the classes so each one of the students had the opportunity to visit the other stations and do the corresponding activities. However, for these classes I allowed students to select where to begin, I asked them to consider both, the results that I gave them about the questionnaire and the checklist, and the type of activities which they thought were the ones that helped them to get the most vocabulary and to feel more motivated or happy while doing said activities.

As for the fourth stage, again I allowed students to choose the station where they wanted to begin as well as the station they wanted to go to when rotation happened. Then, I explained to students that they had to select a definite station for the last part of the stage, with the possibility to collaborate with their classmates from the other stations. They would be most of the time in their own station because they were more aware of their preferred learning style, and the strategies that better helped them learn and use new vocabulary.

Finally, as for the fourth action, I conducted a focus group aiming at gathering final conclusions, perceptions, comments, and recommendations about the differentiated instruction strategy. I asked them if they felt that the station rotation station strategy helped them to increase the amount of vocabulary they knew and could use. I also asked them which station they liked the most over the lessons and compared this information with the previous results from the questionnaire and checklist to see if there was a significant difference in between the teachers'

and the students' perceptions of the students' learning styles. Lastly, I asked them for recommendations or comments they thought could improve this strategy to allow them to feel more motivated and learn more, at the end of the discussion I thanked them for their part-taking in this project.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using the 5 stages proposed by Burns (1999): assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretations, and reporting the outcomes. First, I organized the data collected (memos, students' artifacts, questionnaires, audio and video recordings, tests, the focus group, and the checklist) on an Excel file. Then, I started identifying the relevant preliminary categories and codes. After that, I re-organized the data according to those codes and looked for patterns to gather final interpretations about the project. Finally, I analyzed and triangulated all the information to obtain the final remarks and conclusion.

Memos were written and categorized weekly in preliminary codes, video recordings, audio recordings and students' artifacts were collected and either transcribed and organized on a folder, or written as part of the memos, codified, and analyzed. The questionnaires, checklist, and vocabulary tests were organized on an Excel sheet to denote patterns, codified, and analyzed. And the focus group was transcribed, codified, and analyzed.

Findings and Interpretations

Opportunities

Students Being Able to Use Different Strategies to Become More Autonomous and Aware in the Process of Learning Vocabulary in English

Data analysis showed that students were able to use different strategies to become more autonomous and aware of their skills and strategies in the process of learning vocabulary in English. For instance, most of the students began to take a proactive role in the development of class activities and were taking advantage of different strategies such as getting help or examples from a more competent peer, the use of visual aids, and meta-cognition, to keep on learning and using more vocabulary.

As an illustration, the heterogeneity of the class turned out to be something positive to promote a scaffolding strategy in between students. Following McLeod's (2019, para 10) clarifications, "Scaffolding consists of the activities provided by the educator, or more competent peer, to support the student as he or she is led through the zone of proximal development". It was notable that some advanced students were of major help to clarify the instructions and vocabulary, as well as to maintain order in each station or activity that was conducted. Such was the case of one student who said: "Cuando María me explicó el primero (ejercicio o punto) del punto uno ya yo hice los otros sola"¹ (Research Memo, October 26th, 2022). Consequently, when students were lost or confused with the instructions or vocabulary, they could ask a classmate to clarify the activity or give examples so they could continue by themselves.

Moreover, in one of the conversations I had with some students in class about the station rotation strategy, some of them reported to prefer the kinesthetic. A student said: "podemos hacer cosas con las manos como recortar o pegar o dibujar y así me acuerdo más [*sic*] fácil de las palabras..."², other students said that they really liked the visual station mentioning that:

¹ After Maria explained me the first (exercise) from the first part, I did the others by myself

² We can do handicrafts like to cut, paste or draw, and that way I can remember words easily

“podemos ver dibujos y saber que palabra es”³, another student said that: “con los dibujos se aprende fácil las palabras que nos dice”⁴ (Class Conversation, October 26th, 2022). This evidenced that, although, students were not capable of naming the direct strategy, they were becoming aware of the different paths they could follow to learn the language.

Other examples of students becoming more aware and autonomous in the process were at the moment students could select their station: “I could see that students were very happy when they could do the type of activities that they preferred, and when I asked them what each station was about, they were very clear about the types of activities or things that they had to do” (Research Memo, November 2nd, 2022). Henceforth, students showed both, to be more conscious of the activities that better addressed their preferred learning style, and autonomous with the different strategies they could use to learn the language in and outside the class as seen in the memos where: “a lot of students were trying to do the translations of the complete sentences and create their own sentences outside class activities” (Research Memo, October 26th). This is a big opportunity following differentiated instruction’s objectives of providing students with multiple avenues to learn:

Students become stronger learners when they can accept more responsibility for their own learning and when they become more proficient in understanding their goals, their status relative to those goals, and how to adjust their approach to learning in order to achieve the goals. (Tomlinson, 2011, as cited in Bell, 2017)

Thus, exposing students to distinct types of activities to foster the development of their

³ We can see drawings and know what word it is about

⁴ With drawings I can learn words more easily

learning process, as well as giving them multiple resources to learn the language inside and outside the classroom, helped them become more aware of different strategies they could use to gain understanding, practice, and make use of English vocabulary. Ultimately, rendering the class activities a successful tool to promote students' opportunities to acquire the language and to better understand the way they learn.

Students Being Provided with Different Avenues to Make Use and Demonstrate Their Vocabulary

Data showed a huge opportunity within the implementation of Differentiated Instruction as students were provided with different avenues to practice, make use and demonstrate their vocabulary in relation to their preferred learning style. "I could see that students were very happy when they could do the type of activities that they preferred, and when I asked them what each station was about, they were very clear about the types of activities or things that they had to do" (Research Memo, November 2nd, 2022). Additionally, "I realized that some of the students were performing much better and were able to understand (or make use of) more words from the vocabulary bank than they used to" (Research Memo, November 2nd, 2022). Subsequently, it was evident that most of the students were able to denote how the several types of activities or tasks could provide them with opportunities to work with the vocabulary. For instance, when asked students in the focus group about the different stations, one student said that she preferred the visual station "porque hay que ver imágenes. Y aprendemos más viendo imágenes y videos"⁵, and in contrast, some other students mentioned to not like the auditive station because "uno se

⁵ because we have to see images and we learn more seeing images or videos (my translation)

enreda fácil”⁶ (Focus Group, November 2nd, 2022).

As it is well stated by Tomlinson (2011), “we have way too many students who bring to school with them needs and differences that we just don’t take into account in our thinking and planning” (Bell, 2017), and on that account, it is of absolute necessity to “find effective ways of managing those needs and abilities and to match them to appropriate teaching and learning styles” (Convery, 1993, p.7). Accordingly, students demonstrated over multiple activities to like the fact that they were able to do different things in each station that could address their needs and likes better, to enjoy the process of learning the language, and to increase the amount of their vocabulary. And what is more, when students had the opportunity to select their preferred station near the end of the project, they were incredibly happy because, amongst the things they said, there were prevalent comments about the differentiated instructions like “a mí me gustó porque uno puede rotar porque aprende más Inglés”⁷ or “uno así aprende mucho y aprendemos a hablar Inglés”⁸ or “Es muy chévere hacer lo del grupo kinestésico visual auditivo “⁹ (Research Memo, October 26th, 2022). To see some of the student’s works on each station see figures 1, 2, and 3.

⁶ one can get confused easily (my translation)

⁷ I liked it because one can rotate and learn more English (my translation)

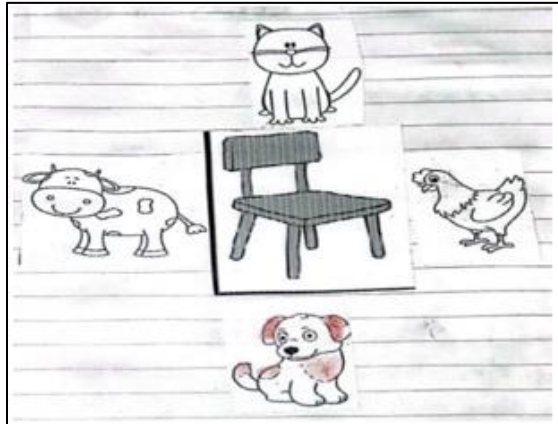
⁸ one learns a lot like this, and we learn to speak English (my translation)

⁹ It is very cool doing the things of the kinesthetic, visual or auditory group (my translation)

Figure 1

Students' work at the kinesthetic station.

September 28th, 2022

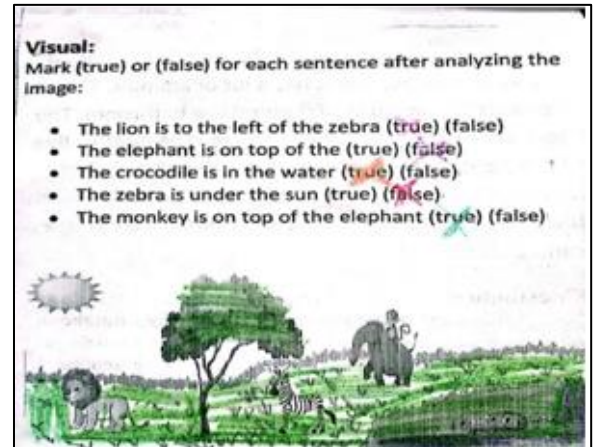


Students had to cut and stick images around the chair following the given prepositions

Figure 2

Student's work on the visual station.

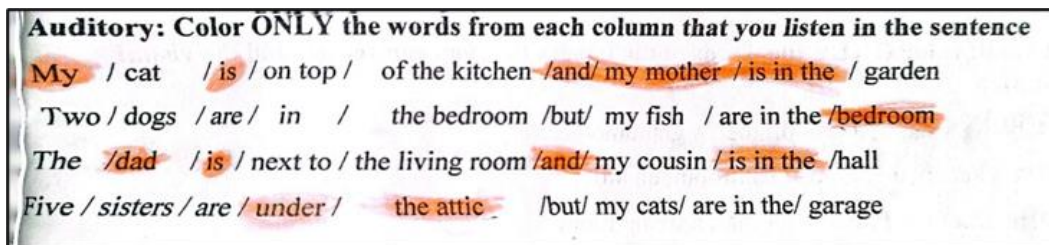
September 28th, 2022



Students had to look at the image and answer true or false questions based on it

Figure 3

Student's work on the auditory station. October 26th, 2022



Students had to color the words they heard from each column

One unmistakable evidence of this opportunity could be identified in the results of the two tests that were applied at the beginning and at the end of the project, where a 44 % of students had their best score on the second test in contrast to 35 % students that got their best grade on the first test (Vocabulary Tests, September 9th - November 9th, 2022). Here, even

though students saw and worked with the assessed vocabulary for less time than with the vocabulary from the first test, most of the class was able to get similar or better results after the implementation of the station rotation, which demonstrated that students were somehow profiting of the type of teaching actions and assessments conducted to keep on improving their vocabulary. Figures 4, 5 and 6 illustrate the progression from the initial and final tests of one of the students.

Figure 4

Student 1's Initial Vocabulary Test.
September 9th, 2022.



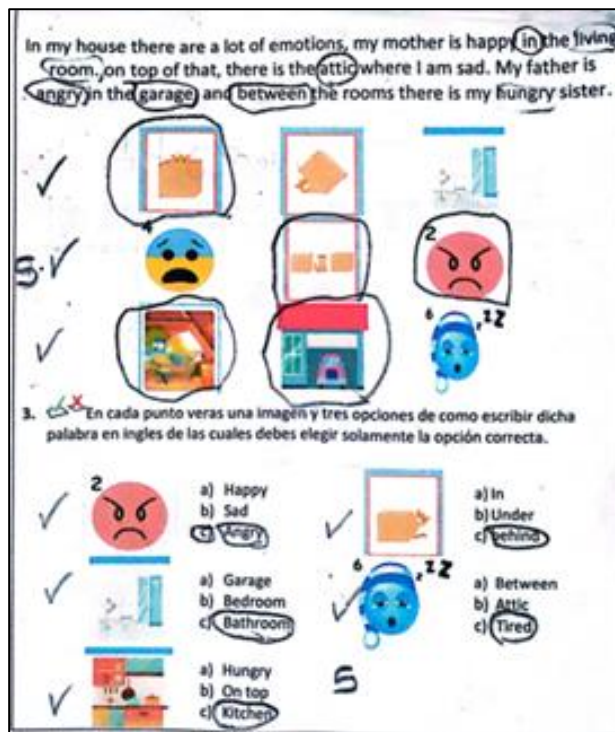
Figure 5

Student 1's Final Vocabulary Test part 1.
November 9th, 2022.



Figure 6

Student 1's Final Vocabulary Test part2. November 9th, 2022.



Challenges

The Lack of Experience on the Matter of Differentiated Instruction Affecting the Planning and Development of Actions and Activities

Data revealed that, in relation to Differentiated Instruction, the lack of experience by my part was an important matter within the implementation of the activities of the project.

Henceforward, it was prominent that aspects such as class and time management, instruction giving and the planning and development of activities posed a certain degree of difficulty for the project, rendering the teaching actions less effective than they could have been.

Over the last weeks of the project, constraints and unclear instructions were recurrent

problems. To exemplify, we did not have enough time to do all the planned actions in several sessions, therefore, the rotation was not always conducted as expected. This was reported multiple times in the memos “A difficulty that I found was that at the time students were in the stations, I couldn’t be always watching or supervising them” (Research Memo, September 23rd, 2022) or when “some of the students took a long time to begin with the activity and got distracted multiple times, also distracting other students” (Research Memo, October 19th, 2022).

As it has been already stated by Tomlinson (2011, as cited in Bell, 2017) “One of the major obstacles for teachers in learning to differentiate instruction is figuring out how to handle a classroom where the teacher is not in front of the kinds all the time pulling the strings like a master puppeteer.” Accordingly, data revealed as challenge for the development of the project the element of being novice or un-expert in the matter of applying the differentiated teaching actions and identifying what could work best for students needs while still giving them a certain degree of freedom.

External Factors, Class Distractions, and Demographics of the Participants Hindering the Development of Actions and Activities within the Station Rotation

Data also demonstrated that multiple external factors, class distractions, and the amount and ages of students also played a significant role in the development of class actions. There were multiple occasions on which the activities were difficult to develop because some or most of the students were not properly disposed to do them. In other cases, the activity was somehow demanding for students to perform it on their own without teacher guidance and supervision as can be noted in the memos:

It was sort of difficult to implement the class rotation strategy, while properly addressing

each student, even when having help from my cooperating teacher and my teacher from the university, which took me to believe that in order to properly apply this type of instruction it would be better to have less students or a continuous presence and help of more than one teacher. (Research Memo, September 28th, 2022)

Additionally, as students were at first not familiar with the station rotation strategy, some of the instructions or purposes of activities were not so clear and students got either confused or demotivated with the development of class actions. An example of this can be identified in the class observations when reported that:

Some students took more time than expected to cut out the images, even though they did not have to cut them perfectly, they wanted to do so because they wanted it to look nicer, which is nice by itself, but it made the activity take longer. (Research Memo, September 28th, 2022)

Furthermore, students' heterogeneity was a challenge at the beginning stages of the project because this meant that the students that were more advanced in the class, either due to their age or context difference, usually finished faster than their classmates. And in numerous occasions those students started creating distractions for those who had not finished as noted in the memos where: "Some students that finished the activity of the station were speaking quite loudly and moving around the classroom which was distracting other students that had not finished" (Research Memo, September 7th, 2022). Another example was evidenced in the focus group, as one student commented that an improvement for the activities would be that "que no se muevan casi y que no griten"¹⁰(Focus Group, November 2nd, 2022).

Accordingly, these external factors and particular demographics became an important challenge at the beginning of the project because they were somehow setting a less positive class environment for everybody to learn and develop at their own pace and enabling multiple class

¹⁰ That they do not move so much and that they do not scream

distractors to appear and to slow class activities down.

Conclusions and Implications

This action research project was directed to determining /acknowledging the opportunities and challenges that the implementation of Differentiation could bring for vocabulary learning of a heterogeneous group. Based on the data analysis, I could conclude that providing students with different avenues to learn, practicing, and making use of vocabulary; as well as fostering the acknowledgment of different learning strategies, could help the participants of this study to increase the amount of vocabulary they had compared to the beginning and to become more aware of different paths/ strategies to learn English. Nonetheless, the lack of expertise in relation to differentiated instruction, and demographics or external factors posed a certain degree of difficulty that was worth considering.

One aspect that comes as of high importance to consider when implementing Differentiated Instruction is that teachers should be very aware of the demographics (such as academic backgrounds, ages, and number of students) and context in which the project or activities are going to be implemented so activities are properly tailored towards students' skills and needs. In this context, as it was not so thoroughly considered at first, this implied that multiple activities were not developed as expected, and consequently, the project could not always be implemented so students became more self-aware in each one of the spaces in which it was planned. In that previous regard, it would be valuable to thoroughly consider these aspects at the moment of planning this type of activities with similar participants, or even implementing this type of instruction in different settings or with different participants so to better understand how students that are more self-aware could profit from the strategy.

Furthermore, on various occasions lesson implementation was not possible as expected due to external factors, events, or holidays that made it impossible to carry out all the activities that could have provided students further avenues of learning and becoming aware of more strategies. Consequently, it would be advisable to conduct extra planning to consider all these situations and to, if possible, provide students a very solid background on Differentiated Instruction and station rotation before applying it so students can work more autonomously even having these limitations.

This project provides grounds to better understand the effects of Differentiated Instruction on students' vocabulary acquisition in an EFL classroom. It also contributes to identifying pertinent elements related to the fostering of student's development of learning strategies. Nonetheless, further research on these issues needs to be conducted involving different, and maybe more advanced participants to elucidate to what extent the opportunities and challenges in relation to vocabulary acquisition and students' meta-cognition can vary and can contribute to further avenues to teach and learn EFL.

Reflection

At the point of finishing my career and having experienced and learned so much from the teaching practice, I can say that I am both satisfied, and a little disappointed at the same time. On one hand, I consider the project allowed to spark off the interest and motivation of many of my students to learn English and perceive the language learning as something fun and enticing that does not have to be difficult if they can find the way to learn it. On the other hand, however, I still have the feeling that my main purpose of giving all the students different avenues to learn was not fully achieved on multiple occasions since I saw that some students did not profit as

much as others from the project. And had I planned the activities more thoroughly; more students would have been addressed in each one of the classes.

Nevertheless, I consider this possibility that was given to me was a wonderful experience because I got to meet some really beautiful people such as my advisory teachers, my cooperating teachers, and of course my students, that during this time made me realize the many aspects that are related to education in our context, but most importantly made me fall in love with teaching and all the possibilities that can be created for students and for society inside a classroom.

Additionally, it also allowed me to become more aware of the types of challenges that are posed in educative scenarios, and in that sense, it gave me resources to better confront the difficulties that I may encounter in the future. Further, it challenged my own personal and professional beliefs about teaching and motivated me to keep on educating and doing research in the looks of always continuing to improve myself and the outlets I give my students to learn.

So as a final reflection, I would like to say that I am very conscious of the fact that even if every class is perfectly planned, and every aspect of the context is attempted to be considered, teaching practices will not be a “perfect” or finished job. But I do consider that it is still worth the pursue of always improving ourselves, personally and professionally, to continuously reflect on the opportunities and challenges resultant of the different avenues that we provide our students to learn the language and be motivated about it.

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