

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES SUPPORTING DIFFERENTIATED AND INDIVIDUALIZED TEACHING IN THE MULTILEVEL CLASSROOMS



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Аннотация

Мақолада кўп босқичли синфларда талабаларнинг турфа хиллиги тавсиф этилган, асосий эътибор аралаш синфларда барча ўрганувчилар эҳтиёжларига жавоб бериш учун табақалаштирилган ва индивидуаллаштирилган ўқитишни рағбатлантирувчи инструкторал стратегиялардан самарали фойдаланишга қаратилган. Шунингдек, мақолада инструкторал стратегия ва техникалардан фойдаланиш ва мослаштириш йўллари тақдим этилган, тавсиялар берилган.

Аннотация

В статье говорится о том, что в многоуровневых классах можно наблюдать студентов с разным уровнем знаний, и акцент делается на использовании эффективных учебных стратегий в рамках дифференцированного и индивидуализированного обучения для удовлетворения потребностей различных групп учащихся в гетерогенных классных комнатах. В этой статье представлены и предложены способы адаптации и использования некоторых эффективных учебных стратегий и методов.

Abstract

The article describes student diversity in the multilevel classrooms and the emphasis is placed on the use of effective instructional strategies within differentiated and individualized teaching to address the needs of diverse learner population in the heterogeneous classrooms. In this article, the ways of adapting and using some efficient instructional strategies and techniques are presented and suggested.

Калит сўзлар: талабаларнинг турфа хиллиги, табақалаштириш, индивидуаллаштириш, инструкторал стратегия, кўп босқичли синфхона.

Ключевые слова: разнообразие студентов, учебная стратегия, индивидуализация, дифференциация, многоуровневая классная комната.

Keywords: student diversity, instructional strategy, individualization, differentiation, multilevel classroom.

It is acknowledged that every classroom is multilevel to some degree due to learner differences in: proficiency levels, learning styles, motivation, personality, interests, abilities, intelligences, language learning aptitude, age, gender, and educational background. In this connection, it should be noted that these variations in learners result in some challenges for teachers to deal with. Therefore, in our

view, this problem should be addressed by applying instructional strategies under the framework of differentiation and individualization.

Firstly, we want to define the term “multilevel classroom”. In the field of education we often come across such terms as “multilevel group”, “multilevel classroom”, “mixed-ability classes” and etc. All these terms refer to the same definition. According to Julie M.A and Regina V.H (2006), the term multilevel refers to “*classes where learners from a wide range of levels, from beginning to advanced, are placed together in a single group*”(1, 2–5). The term refers to student-centered classrooms in some literature while it refers to “inclusive teaching” which means teaching children with considerable differences in academic abilities together in one classroom and challenging children with tasks where students can learn at their own level. Also, the term is often called as heterogeneous groups or non-homogeneous classes.

In our context, we should note that the term “multilevel classroom” can be interpreted in two senses: narrow and wide. In its wide sense, it refers to student diversity not only in proficiency level, but also other needs of learners such as interest, intelligence, learning style, educational background and etc. In its narrow sense, we use this term for student differences in language proficiency level.

Our classrooms are diverse and multilevel due to learner differences as mentioned in previous paragraphs. To meet the needs of these diverse students in one classroom teachers must consider some effective instructional strategies in the framework of differentiated and individualized instructions.

It is also claimed that the EFL teachers should adapt their instruction to student needs in order to effectively manage heterogeneous classrooms. However, adaptation of instruction should be made on the basis of some criteria supporting learner needs in the multilevel classroom environment. At this point, it is reasonable to note that there are a number of researchers (C.A. Tomlinson, 1999; June Preszler, 2006) who contributed to differentiated and individualized teaching through offering some instructional strategies for effective management of multilevel classes. More particularly, June Preszler (2006, 8) suggests the following criteria for adapting instruction to address student diversity in the classroom. Below, we will look at the ways of changing activities and assignments suggested by the author according to learner needs:

- Level of complexity;
- Pacing of the assignment;
- Amount of structure;
- Number of steps required for completion;
- Materials provided;

- Form of expression (letter, essay, report, research paper, short story, speech)
- Time allowed;
- Level of independence required.

In our view, it is important to deal with interpretation of these instructional strategies in order to discuss them in detail: a) the EFL teacher can modify the content of the language material through designing activities and tasks at different levels of complexity and difficulty to reinforce all learners to be fully involved in the learning process at their own level and in its own turn, this can significantly contribute to student engagement and motivation; b) the assignment can also be differentiated in response to learner needs such as learning styles, readiness level and interest. To put it more concisely, the EFL teacher can assign individualized tasks requiring students to perform at different speeds appropriate for their learning needs; c) the amount of the tasks assigned for students can also be modified in accordance with their needs. More particularly, teacher can assign more tasks to higher level students while they can challenge lower level students with less amount of classwork; d) the modification of production or output can also be encouraged in the well-run multilevel classroom. For example, as June Preszler (2006) notes, teacher can provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning outcomes at different forms such as letter, essay, report, research paper, short story, speech. This can offer different ways for learners to produce their input in accordance with their learning needs such as language level, mode of learning and interest; e) in terms of time, teacher can also use a strategy to differentiate and individualize the amount of time required from learners to complete a task according to their needs. More accurately, more time can be allowed for below level students whereas less time can be given to students at higher levels of proficiency. By differentiating the amount of time, teacher can meet the needs of all learners in the multilevel classes.

We also believe that instruction should be differentiated to address learner variations in the heterogeneous classes. In this respect, it should be particularly noted that Carol Ann Tomlinson, a leading expert in the field of differentiated instruction, reports in her works (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002) that teachers can use some instructional strategies to respond student diversity in the multilevel classrooms and to promote success in multilevel classrooms. Below, we will look at the main instructional strategies or techniques suggested by the author. We argue that these teaching strategies and technologies can be applied in our teaching contexts as well. The main reason for this belief would be that these techniques can support differentiation and be fruitfully applied to respond the needs of all learners in a classroom:

One of the instructional strategies proposed by Tomlinson is an agenda. As cited by Tomlinson (2), “*an agenda is a personalized list of tasks that a particular student must complete in a specified time*” (2, 66). More precisely, it is an instructional strategy designed by the teacher for a student to complete a task within a two or three weeks’ time. During this time teacher will have an opportunity to monitor or instruct students who are struggling or need additional support or work. Teachers can take the advantage of this strategy by assigning a list of tasks to an individual learner coming out of his/her learning needs such as readiness level, interests, learning styles. The number, level of difficulty, level of complexity of tasks on an agenda can be adapted to the needs of every learner in a classroom. So, this strategy can be considered as an instructional component of differentiated and individualized teaching through which the EFL teacher can meet the needs of multilevel students by personalizing tasks and activities for certain students on an “agenda” format.

Tiered activities are other effective instructional strategies that support differentiation. As proposed by Tomlinson (2) “*tiered activities are designed to make all learners focus on the essential content or skills, but activities are tiered according to different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness*” (2, p 88). To be more accurate, it can be said that the focus of activities is the same for all learners however different learners are provided with access to complete a task at varying degrees of difficulty. It should be specifically underlined that the use of this instruction in the multilevel classroom can yield positive instructional and management results, addressing the learner needs such as readiness and proficiency level, particularly.

Group investigation is defined by Tomlinson (2) as a strategy that is designed to reinforce learners to choose a topic of their interest and investigate it in small groups according to their interest level. Teachers will help students how to “*plan the investigation, carry out the investigation, present findings, and evaluate outcomes both individually and as a group*” (2, 92). As is claimed by the author, this strategy requires the use of varying complexity of research materials by learners according to their readiness levels. It should be also stressed that the EFL teacher can create an interactive learning environment through using this strategy in the well-run multilevel classroom because it requires students to work in group, share ideas, solve specific problems through discussion and debating.

Independent study can also be applied as an instructional strategy by a teacher in order to offer opportunities for students to develop their ability and interest areas. This strategy makes learners develop their skills to work independently on a specific topic, to manage time, to set goals and criteria, to present new understanding, skill or concept of a topic. Independent study allows

responding student readiness, interest, and learning profile. In particular, it can be noted that this strategy is student-centered in nature: for example, it develops learner autonomy, a sense of ownership of his/her own learning, a sense of learning responsibility, self-evaluation and assessment, self-control and self-direction in their own learning.

Another instructional strategy supporting differentiation in a classroom as suggested by Tomlinson (2) is portfolios. “*Portfolios are collections of student work completed over time*” (2, 100). Teachers can take the advantage of portfolios in reflecting on learners’ growth. That’s to say, learner development and growth in their study can be observed, evaluated and identified by the teacher. Portfolios can be a good means of extrinsic motivation for students because they emphasize student choice and create an opportunity for them to be involved in their learning process as they prefer: preferred way, time, and level of complexity. In other words, learner needs such as readiness, interest and learning style are in the instructional focus of portfolios.

Problem-based learning is designed to involve learners in solving problems which are unclearly or complexly presented by the teacher. As Tomlinson (2) stated, through engaging students in problem-solving learning condition, the EFL teacher encourage them to try “*to find supplementary information, define the problem, locate and appropriately use valid resources, make decisions about solutions, pose a solution, communicate that solution to others, and assess the solution’s effectiveness*” (2, 92). This strategy results in revealing varied learning strengths, allows use of a variety of resources, and also offers an opportunity to address student readiness, interest, and learning profile. At this point, it is important to discuss differentiation and individualization oriented nature of problem-based learning in detail: firstly, students can deal with different aspects of the subject being discussed according to their level (higher level students do more challenging and complex parts of the task while low level learners are involved in smaller, easier sections of the problem); secondly, according to their interest (they are provided opportunities to choose a topic, a case or a problem within a lesson, unit or a book to deal with) and finally, in terms of learning profile, students can approach to their successful learning in a way that they prefer or are good at: reflectors and theorists design, deal with assumptions, beliefs and models on a topic while activists and pragmatist are concerned with quick decision-making, implementing, solution providing aspects of the problem under discussion.

According to C.A. Tomlinson, choice boards offer a variety of assignments for students. These tasks can be selected by students according to their learning needs and choice. Tomlinson (3) highlights that choice boards are good ways of

responding the readiness and interest differences of learners. Tomlinson claims that full instructions for every task should be given(3).

As can be perceived from the content of the previous paragraphs, the strategies discussed above are learner-centered and differentiation and individualization oriented in nature and this can be observed in the following points: a) these strategies promote student motivation, engagement, participation in their own learning; b) they address student needs such as readiness, proficiency level, interest and learning profile; c) they create opportunities and chances for learners to perform and grow at a maximum scale; d) they facilitate and reinforce student active learning such as self-evaluation and assessment, self-control and direction, a sense of learning responsibility and ownership of their own learning and develop self-monitoring and regulating skills. These conclusive points have induced us to come to the following reflections:

To sum up, the following inferences can be drawn:

- Student diversity in the multilevel classrooms can be addressed through the application of instructional strategies and principles under the framework of differentiation and individualization;
- Some instructional strategies such as an agenda, choice boards, group investigation, portfolios, problem-based learning and tiered activities can be fruitfully applied to meet the needs of all learners in the multilevel classes;
- Modifications and adaptations in the content, process and product can be made to respond the learning needs of all learners in the language classroom;
- The use of the strategies discussed above can facilitate student active participation and growth in their own learning.

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