

A Case-Study of Differentiated Instruction in the EFL Reading Class in one high school in Morocco

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Abstract— *The current study examines the effects of Differentiated Instruction (DI) on the reading skill in the EFL class (2nd Baccalaureate, Arts-stream) in one High School in Morocco. One EFL class was taught a reading comprehension lesson in the traditional one-size-fits-all mode and later in the differentiated one. The teacher observed for this study modified the reading instruction based on students' interests. The study investigated interest grouping as a DI reading strategy used to differentiate the reading instruction. Students were surveyed after the implementation of DI methodology to measure its impact on their engagement in the reading area. This study followed a case-study design, with in-depth analysis of the researcher's own observation and students' interviews. The method was very informative in identifying students' needs in reading. It also provided the teacher with insights while planning for effective ways to cater for students' needs. A qualitative survey of students' attitudes was also necessary to delve deeper into the human dimensions of DI's impact on the learners' performance and engagement.*

Keywords— *Differentiated Instruction, EFL Class, Reading Comprehension, Interest Grouping.*

I. INTRODUCTION

A primary concern of EFL instructors in today's classroom is to help all their students reach an optimal academic performance. In Morocco, there is a wide national movement of reform that seeks individuation of student performance levels (Council, 2015). Hence, schools are striving to meet the requirements of a new educational vision of instruction, on the one hand, and the pressing demands of the third millennium in education, on the other hand. EFL teachers also need to implement new methods and approaches to be in tandem with the worldwide trends in education. Teaching the four language skills mandates a broad understanding of students' needs and interests. EFL Classrooms are now becoming more heterogeneous and student variance has become an undeniable fact. To fix this dilemma, EFL teachers need to change their traditional instructional habits and practices, which might have deleterious effects on students' academic performance, by using differentiated methods and strategies to cater for the diverse student population. Anderson (2007) posited that teachers who understand differentiated instruction use a medley of strategies to cater for students' differences in needs and abilities. Wenglinisky (2002) also claimed that academic success is contingent upon instructional approaches and practices. Armed with this understanding,

EFL teachers can contribute so much to students' success in the four skills, particularly in the reading area.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Reading has always been considered a perennial challenge for both teachers and students alike. The problem of teaching and learning reading in the Moroccan EFL classroom emanates from the fact that it is often thought of as a subservient skill not as a self-contained one (MEN, 2007). Besides, EFL teachers often lack the professional training needed to cater for a variety of students' differences in their classrooms. Because of this, most teachers undervalue its detriment to learning the other language components, vis. the reading impact goes unnoticed. However, reading forms strong relationships with other skills like writing. Development in reading and writing as self-contained skills requires exposing learners to a variety of highly challenging reading and writing tasks.

The teaching methods adopted by most teachers in the EFL classroom fail to accommodate students' differences in terms of ability levels and learners' profiles. Traditional ways of teaching reading or *the-one-size-fits-all* approach to teaching this skill fail to see students' differences and teach them as if they are a carbon copy of each other.

Baccalaureate students (especially Art-majors) lack efficiency in performing the reading tasks outlined in the national curriculum. Most of them complain about the lack of understanding of those texts embedded in the prescribed textbooks. The problem is likely due to teachers' ignorance of DI and their unwillingness to individualize their teaching practices to cater for all types of readers that populate their classrooms. DI is a great asset to cater for a large body of student population as it provides different modalities for teaching and learning reading.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper set out to answer the following research questions

1. Does differentiating the way teachers teach reading make any difference in students learning that skill?
2. What are students' attitudes after the implementation of differentiated instruction in the reading area?

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical evidence of differentiated instruction can be linked to many theories and approaches like learning styles, multiple intelligence theory (MI) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Additionally, the strategic vision (SV) for reform of the Moroccan educational system (2015-2030) is another theoretical underpinning of DI as it calls for the need to serve a varied student population.

a. Learning Styles

An integral part to understanding the need for differentiation in education is through understanding learning styles. This mandates adjusting teaching styles on the part of teachers (LeFever, 2004). Knowing about learning styles helps teachers reach out to all students in their classrooms and teach them effectively. Additionally, students are likely to succeed if teachers teach them in their preferred contextual approach to learning (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Learning styles force teachers to rethink how they do school and for whom. Affirming students' learning styles and strengths also speeds up their learning processes.

Learning styles can also be defined as 'characteristics of cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment'

(Sims, 1995, p.147). That is, students respond to a given content in different ways and identifying how they learn is likely to help provide effective instruction for them. Teachers need then to incorporate various preference modalities in their daily instructional practices.

EFL Instructors are required to increase their understanding of how learners learn and be conscious of individual learning styles to ensure maximum learning success. One way to do that is through using Fleming's learning styles model known as VAK to assess students' modalities /preferences for learning before embarking on the teaching process. Students learn in one of these ways: visual, auditory or kinesthetic. They demonstrate one of these modalities or a mix of all these preferences and strengths during learning anything.

b. Multiple Intelligence theory (MI)

The theoretical foundations of this study are also anchored in the works of Howard Gardener's Multiple Intelligence theory (MI) in which he claims that human beings possess different types of intelligence. The latter is fluid, not fixed, which means that teachers should cater for all differences within the same classroom when delivering instruction and assigning assessment (Tomlinson, 1999). MI shows how human beings interact with the world because they represent different preferences for learning or thinking (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). As a result, teachers must nurture all types of intelligences within their classrooms and allow for different affinities among their learners, vis. their instructional approaches should not seclude the other types of intelligences that students might possess. Instead, they should create opportunities for varied learners because they learn in different ways.

However, the traditional linguistic and logical way of doing school does not yield any positive impact on students' learning outcomes. In this regard, Armstrong (2009) posited that culture perceives intelligence too narrowly. Hence, the need for a differentiated instruction system that calls for equity and excellence through building multiple intelligences and nurturing differences among students.

c. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Another integral part of the theoretical conception of this study finds its roots in the works of Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD which refers to:

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by

independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers (p. 86)

In other words, ZPD is about the intellectual level learners can reach on their own and the one they can reach with the help of a teacher or adult. Teachers, then, are required to provide instructional input within the range of the learners' capacities and, hence, allow for differentiation. Teaching is meaningful only if it promotes cognitive challenge. Humans learn best with moderate challenge and through scaffolding and accommodation within their ZPD until a particular skill is mastered. Teachers have to align instruction with the learners' ZPD. Learning can take place if it matches the learner's ZPD and the readiness levels he/she is at during learning a particular knowledge or skill (Vygotsky, 1978).

In accordance with the philosophy of DI, EFL teachers need to deliver instructional input in ways that can match the development stage of each learner and this is how students' readiness will be catered for. Besides, they should provide learners with tasks a bit beyond their actual developmental level so that they can be challenged. Tomlinson (1999) admits that 'Individuals learn best when they are in a context that provides a moderate challenge' (p. 19). DI derives its core tenets from the rudiments of ZPD. Therefore, teachers are required to build scaffolds once students are within the ZPD and help them boost their learning outcomes to finish whatever task at hand, and withdraw them once students are able to complete the task alone.

d. The Strategic Vision and other official documents that underpin differentiation

All current key educational documents in Morocco: the National Literary and Non-formal Education Strategy established in 2004, the Accessibility and Infrastructure Reform in 2005, and the Education Emergency Plan in 2009, the Strategic Vision (SV) for the Reform of the Moroccan School (2015 - 2030) insist on one message: schools should opt for equity and equal opportunities for all the learners. Students' differences matter and successful teachers need to attend to those differences in a responsive way. The message is even clearer at the SV's first pillar which emphasizes school fairness and equality of opportunities as a gateway to emancipation and personal and social development (Council, 2015). The SV as

mandated by the National Council for Higher Education recognizes the importance of equity and equal opportunity which must be the top agenda of the Moroccan educational system. This can only happen through providing learners with respectful tasks that take into consideration their multiple intelligences, not through mandating the-one-size-fits-all approach to instruction or through a prescribed curriculum as these exclude many learners from the process of reaching maximum growth.

In full accord with common sense, teachers must not force-fit students into ready-made molds and walk them in lock steps to traverse the same learning roads (Tomlinson, 1999). Eventually, there is an urgent need for differentiated instruction that respects students' differences. This is the aim of an effective teaching philosophy that is implicitly embedded in the strategic vision as another reform attempt that emphasizes education as a gateway to social and personal development via equipping our Moroccan students with the soft skills that are likely to meet the pressing demands of the 21st labor market.

V. CASE STUDY

a. Context:

The EFL class under investigation was a 2nd BAC, *Arts-stream* (equivalent to 12th grade). It was composed of 28 students (6 males and 22 females). As regards age, they were between 16 and 20. The majority of them have been in the same class since middle school, except for two students who just moved from another city. The school, where the study was conducted, was considered underserved. *It was situated at the heart of scores of underprivileged neighborhoods in Khouribga and went by the name of El Mouahidine*

The EFL teacher observed for this study (Mr. Reda Ali, pseudonym) was 40 years old and has been teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for 17 years. He was nominated by both the school director and the ELT supervisor given his solid background and competence. He was knowledgeable in the area of teaching methodology, particularly differentiated instruction. He had received online training on the topic and was very keen on innovative instructional methods and strategies.

Through pertinent classroom observation and daily contact with students, Mr. Reda came to the conclusion that the majority of students in his classroom struggled with the reading skill. The reading materials presented in the prescribed textbook, *Ticket to English 2* were either

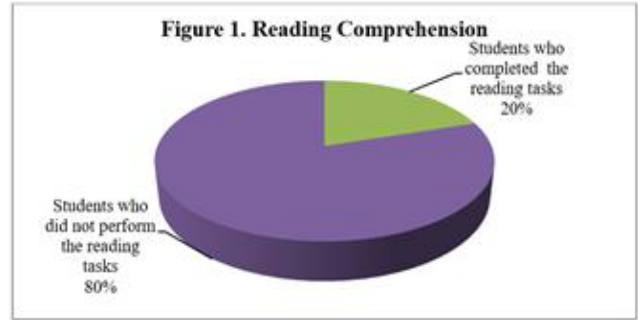
outdated and obsolete in terms of content (texts and pictures) or written in such an unauthentic manner that it was difficult for students to grasp even in their own language, let alone perform the mandatory reading tasks and activities in the English language.

Mr.Redha taught his students on a daily basis from Monday to Friday with one hour- session devoted to reading comprehension. The class record book revealed that the majority of students performed below grade level. Some of them even experienced frustration and chose to opt out of the reading task any time they were assigned to read. Consequently, the reading class was a real challenge for both the teacher and the students.

A case study design was employed to investigate the participant teacher’s practices of teaching reading before and after implementing DI. Classroom observation was conducted to delve deeper into the instructional practices pertaining to the reading skill, investigate students’ attitudes related to reading after the introduction of DI as a learning mode, and deepen understanding of students’ reactions to the reading task under investigation. At the end of the DI lesson, informal interviews were conducted with students following the classroom observations to document their attitudes pertaining to the DI reading instruction.

b. Reading Comprehension in the traditional one-size-fits-all instruction.

Mistakenly, many EFL teachers think they teach reading, while in reality they only test reading. As a result, students fail to learn how to read, let alone perform the many tasks and activities associated with reading. In the case under study, Mr.Redha initially taught reading comprehension as it is usually performed in most language classes. That is, all students were asked to silently read the same single text (the one in their textbooks) and perform certain similar reading comprehension tasks like true/false, comprehension questions, reference questions, etc. Consequently, only 20 % of students managed to complete the required tasks. 80% waited for correction time to get rid of the reading burden as shown in the figure below. The teacher wrapped up the reading activity by asking students to copy the answers in their notebooks.



Differentiated Instruction for the EFL reading class

After things went awry in the first traditional reading instructional mode, the teacher participant resorted to the DI mode. At the beginning of the session, he informally interviewed the students about their likes and dislikes. He found out that some students speak Korean and are interested in *K-pop* music. Some others speak *Amazigh* and are very good at acting. One of the students is already a member of a drama club in town. Other students are good at singing and playing musical instruments. Students then were identified for differentiated teaching methodology based on the interview results and on the students’ interests. The teacher agreed to use interest grouping based on students’ interests mentioned earlier.

The teacher announced the reading sub-skill that students were to be trained on and its use during the lesson (Identifying the main idea of a paragraph) and then provided a definition of the target strategy and explained its value. Mr.Redha used the same activity in the students’ textbook (*Gifts take many forms*). He modelled explicitly the reading activities to be performed and explained why things went wrong in the first class and asked students to practice on their own. At a later stage, he introduced a new reading material (Tommy’s story) (Appendix) and encouraged students to execute the task in a different context while working in small groups. Students were grouped accordingly in six groups (Chart 1).

Chart 1: Grouping students by interest

Group1	Choose one part of the text and translate it into Korean
Group2	Choose one part of the text and re-write it using another pronoun.(substitute the actual pronoun with another one)
Group3	Choose one part of the text and translate it into Arabic or Amazigh
Group4	Choose one part of the text and change its form from prose into a skit and act it out

Group5	Choose one paragraph and compose a song based on Tommy's story
Group6	(For Advanced students) write about the moral lesson behind Tommy's story.

Students chose their preferred group according to their interests. The nature of the suggested activities in the groups enhanced their appetite for reading. The activities were only a pretext that allowed students to fully read the target text and decipher its meaning. Additionally, when students saw the likeness of one another through the interest grouping they became motivated toward the reading tasks and fully engaged in it. This was absent in the first reading attempt when the teacher taught the students wholesale without taking their interest and needs into consideration.

c. Attitude

At the end of the second DI reading class, the teacher met with his students and interviewed them informally about their insights and attitudes pertaining to the new DI mode of instruction. The majority of them demonstrated positive attitudes about the instructional mode as it related to their interest in some way. They also demonstrated understanding of the extra text suggested by the teacher given the nature of the reading tasks and activities they performed. Additionally, they expressed their appreciation for having a plethora of choices to choose from and decide how to approach the reading task at hand. 99% believed that the reading comprehension session was so much fun, their needs were met and that they could express their interests while still doing reading.

VI. RESULTS

The decision for planning instruction was based on the data collected about students' interests and the failure to finish the first reading assignment. The teacher, Mr.Redda, modified instruction to cater for the needs of his students after he noticed that the previous lesson was a total fiasco. The teacher's intervention is grounded in the theory of differentiated instruction advocated by Tomlinson who is in favour of instructional modification (Tomlinson, 1999). The teacher under study resorted to differentiation when things went awry with the first session. Knowing well about the students, the teacher planned more effectively for instruction by assigning tasks within students' reach and based on their needs. The choices were also aligned with students' interests and happened to be within their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

VII. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Giving new learning opportunities and venues for this reading class proved so efficient. Learning took place in an anxiety free atmosphere characterized by the ample existence of a plethora of choices and options. Students felt they could connect their interests and needs with the reading material at hand and were no longer intimidated by its content. Students continued to progress and showed love for the reading task through the use of DI. Although only product differentiation was performed, students were motivated for the reading lesson. Tomlinson confirmed that the product may be adjusted based on a student's readiness level to learn a skill, their learning profile, and/or their particular interest in a topic (Tomlinson, 1999).

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Appendix Reading Comprehension Tommy's story

Drummer Tommy, 15, is studying GCSE Music and loves composing his own beats. It's a real change from a few years ago, when he had issues controlling his temper and was excluded from school several times. The Drum Works project has given him a creative outlet and helped him stay out of trouble.

Tommy attends The Warren School in East London, where Drum Works has been running fast-paced, high-energy drumming sessions for the past three years. He's been involved in the project since he was 12.

"I was a bit of a troublemaker," says Tommy. "But then I got invited to Drum Works, and it really helped me. It was like all my behaviour got hit into the drums."

I expressed myself on the drums instead of taking my anger out on other people.

Developing as a musician

In the sessions, students drum together in groups of up to 25. The lineup of instruments is similar to a samba band, with each person playing a *surdo*, *repinique* or *caixa* (three different types of Brazilian drum).



Instead of playing a pre-arranged repertoire, the young people get the chance to create their own beats collaboratively, based on the styles of music they enjoy. "You can express your ideas," says Tommy. "You get to make your own stuff, and you can spread it around the room."

Tommy's now a keen drummer outside the sessions too. "I used to play trumpet and trombone, but I got bored of it, and me and my friends started playing the drum kit," he recalls. "But we didn't know anything at all – we literally knew how to hit a drum."

"The Drum Works music leaders are really helpful – if you can't play a beat, they're not gonna judge you for it, they'll teach you till you know how to do it."

"I picked Music for GCSE, and I've been doing compositions on the drums, writing my own beats. Drum Works has helped me get more ideas. In the group I play the snare, so I can adapt from that and turn what we play on separate drums into a beat on the drum kit."

Gaining focus and confidence

The sessions are built into the school timetable, and Tommy's certain that drumming has a positive impact on the rest of his day. "Coming here's like a break," he says. "It wakes you up, you're ready for another lesson." Susie, a music teacher at the school, recalls the change she saw in Tommy after he found drumming. "His behaviour didn't change overnight, but slowly Tommy's confidence improved as he realised he was good at something."

"His patience and concentration span improved too as he spent the time trying to perfect patterns. He spent his lunchtimes in the music department practising and avoided the conflicts he'd previously been involved with. He enjoyed coming to school as that's where the drum rooms were."

"He enjoyed making progress and getting better at something. He'd learnt that the only way to improve is to make mistakes and that it's ok to make them."

Teamwork and group performance

The partnership between The Warren School and Drum Works has grown stronger over the course of the project, as more and more teaching staff have observed the sessions' all-round positive impact on students.

There are now 70-80 students from across years 7-11 now regularly involved in the sessions, split across three groups based on their drumming skill levels.

"Although we only have one session a week, you get to know everyone in that session," says Tommy. "You always work together no matter what. I've made good friends with the rest of the group."

The groups have also combined with students from other East London schools where Drum Works sessions take place, and have given end-of-term performances in venues

such as the Barbican Centre and the Broadway Theatre in Barking.

“There’s about 150 of us in one big group,” says Tommy. “Managing to go out and play in front of so many people – I would say that’s been my proudest moment. When I first started drumming I had to play in front of the class, and I was so scared, I started sweating! I’m confident with it now though.”

If it wasn’t for Drum Works, I would have missed out on a lot of things. This is like a once in a lifetime opportunity. Even when I finish school, I can use the skills I’ve learned.”

By : El khdar text retrieved from <https://www.youthmusic.org.uk/tommys-story>