

STRATEGIES FOR DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL
ENGLISH CLASSROOM IN CHINA

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Madelon Kohler-Busch

In today's English teaching, more and more teachers are aware of the differences between students, such as differences in English proficiency, language abilities, and language habits. The traditional one-size-fits-all teaching method cannot meet the needs of all students and will also reduce their interest in learning English. Therefore, more and more scholars are calling on teachers to use differentiated teaching in English classrooms, understand and respect students' differences, and help students establish confidence in English learning. However, due to some practical reasons, such as a large class size, lack of professional training for teachers, and lack of support from parents, differentiated instruction is difficult to implement in English classrooms. This article mainly explores the following three aspects through literature analysis: differentiated instruction in America and at home; difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction; effective strategies for teaching English in primary school.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

With the implementation of nine-year compulsory education in China, the basic education industry has entered a new stage of development, and people have begun to call for the promotion of educational equity. According to Jiang and Hua (2004), differentiated instruction has become a new starting point for curriculum reform in China, as it adapts to students' individual differences, meets their learning needs, and promotes the full development of each student on their original foundation.

According to Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2011), English courses should become a process for students to build knowledge, develop skills, broaden their horizons, and demonstrate their individuality under the guidance of teachers. Due to differences in age, personality, cognitive style, and living environment, students have different learning needs and characteristics. Thus, it is important to meet their individual needs and build up their confidence to learn English and to well challenge them to get the sense of language learning achievement at the stage of primary school. Taking each student's individual learning needs into consideration when preparing lessons will help to maximize students' learning. Thus, it's necessary for primary school English teachers to learn effective strategies for differentiated instruction.

Statement of the Problem

Every student is an independent, unique individual. They are different from each other in learning styles, learning ability, family background, readiness, interest, cetera. However, in our daily English teaching, we use the same teaching techniques and the same content to teach all students in the class. What's more, we even use the same standards to evaluate these individuals. As a result, some students lose their interest in learning English when they are unable to keep at

the course level or cannot catch up with the others. These students then are afraid of speaking English, while some others might think it's a waste of their time to sit in the classroom to learn the things they already know. The call for respecting each student's uniqueness and helping them to make progress in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has been growing in recent years. However, even though differentiated instruction has been put forward for some years, not many teachers can put it into practice for various reasons, such as the big class size in China or teacher's lack of understanding of this concept. In this article, the author will use library research to find out what the challenges for the English teachers are to implement differentiated instruction and what effective strategies for teaching English in primary school are.

Definition of Terms

The American scholar Carol Ann Tomlinson (2001) pointed out that considering students differences is the key component in the differentiated classroom. Differentiated Instruction can help students learn effectively, by providing different ways for the students to acquire content, process learning, and develop outcomes.

According to Chinese scholar Hua (2001), differentiated instruction refers to the practice that teachers incorporate and take care of students' differences and meet their different needs as to maximize their learning.

Vygotsky (1978) develop a learning theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Cynthia (2019) mentioned that ZPD refers to the gap between what students can do without guidance and what they can probably reach with the practice of scaffolding provided by a more knowledge person. It requires teachers to teach students within their ZPD, taking students' differences and their needs into consideration and offer them help to reach their proximal development.

Purpose of the Study

Differentiated instruction is one of the most important concepts in Chinese elementary education and is a highly meaningful topic in the context of quality education. Even though a majority of the English teachers in primary school acknowledged the importance of differentiated instruction in teaching, it was found that it is hard for them to carry out this teaching method. Thus, it's necessary to promote changes in the teaching behavior of English teachers and update their teaching concepts. The purpose of this study is research relevant scholarship at home and abroad to find out how to use differentiated instruction and what effective strategies can be used in primary English teaching. The research in this paper has certain academic value for improving English teaching in primary schools.

Significance of the Study

In today's teaching, one-size-fits-all instruction is the mainstream in primary school teaching. Teachers seldom take care of individual differences and use the same standard to evaluate students. As a result, individual students' abilities cannot be fully stimulated. However, as a teacher, the ultimate goal for us is to help every student to make their progress. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to notice students' differences and at the same time get to know more about how to effectively use differentiated instruction and put it into practice in classroom teaching. It will help the students to build the confidence to learn English. Once the students gain a sense of achievement, they will keep their enthusiasm for life-long language learning.

Methodology

The focus of the research is to investigate effective strategies for primary school teachers to implement differentiated instruction in English classes. As a library research-based study, this

paper will refer to some resources from various platforms, such as UW-Platteville Karmann library, China National Knowledge Infrastructure and some physical books. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic being investigated, the author will carefully analyze and synthesize the resources gained from these platforms.

During the process, the writer searches the keywords like "differentiated instruction", "language learning", and "implement differentiated instruction in primary school" to find some relevant materials. The author found that most of the existing materials related to differentiated instruction are conducted in colleges and universities, but there are few studies in primary schools. Therefore, this research topic is very worth exploring. As an English teacher in primary school, the author wants to research the implementation of differentiated instruction in primary school in China and find out the effective strategies for primary school teachers to implement differentiated instruction in English classes.

Chapter 2 Review of Literature

In this chapter, the writer will cover the following three research questions:

1. Why do we need to use differentiated instruction?
2. What are the difficulties in using differentiated instruction in Chinese primary school?
3. What are effective strategies for primary school teachers to use differentiated instruction in English class?

In order to answer the research questions, the author will first refer to the research published at home and abroad. Further, the author will collect the information about the development of differentiated instruction at home and abroad. Here, the author will find and discuss challenges to the implementation of this method in Chinese primary school and, finally, the author will summarize effective strategies for the primary school teacher to use differentiated instruction.

Differentiated Instruction in America and at Home

Differentiated Instruction in America. After consulting lots of literature, the author found that the development of differentiated instruction in America had roughly gone through the following stages:

The first stage was at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. With the popularization of compulsory education in the United States, more and more people stepped into classrooms. However, class teaching had its drawbacks, which neglected individual needs. Thus, Carleton Wolsey Washburne (1889–1968), as cited in Yakovleva (2020), developed a mode of individualized education, which enabled each student to learn at their self-pace.

At the second stage, Virgil Ward (1961) proposed that the gifted students needed differential education. After the publication of Marland report (1972), differentiation gained its place in the field of education. The report states that students with exceptional talents "require differentiated

educational programs and/or services".

At the third stage, Howard Gardner (1983), a cognitive psychologist from Harvard University, brought the theory of multiple intelligences. He believed that each student possesses eight or more relatively intelligences and they use these intelligences, individually and corporately, to solve the problem they meet in their life. Everyone has their own unique intelligence, and there is no question of who is smart and who is not smart. Instead, each person has different intellectual strengths and weaknesses. This theory provides an important theoretical basis for the emergence of differentiated teaching.

At the fourth stage, it comes to the stage of inclusive education. Hua (2009) mentioned that inclusive education originated from disabilities education. It emphasized embracing all students, opposing discrimination and exclusion and meeting different needs. According to UNESCO (1994), inclusive education was officially put forward in the world conference of *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Huang (2004) states that this conference once again emphasizes that everyone has the fundamental right to education, and proposes that everyone has their unique personality, interests, abilities, and learning needs. It suggests teachers to teach for "difference". From this point, it can be said that inclusive education has become the pioneer of differentiated teaching

At the fifth stage, more and more scholars were paying attention to researching differentiated instruction. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2001) proposed the theory of differentiated instruction. She was considered the person who has conducted most research on differentiated instruction so far. Carol Ann Tomlinson also pointed out in her book, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms. 2nd Edition*, that the core of differentiated instruction is to notice the individual differences among students. Teacher should design the teaching content, procedure, and product

based on students' readiness, interests, and learning styles. The ultimate goal is to help all students make their progress. The other American scholar Diane Heacox was also one of the main scholars for developing differentiated instruction. Heacox (2002), in her book *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom*, also pointed out: “The speed, level, or type of teaching should be set according to the learners' needs, learning styles, and interests. differentiated instruction not only acknowledges that each student is different, but also emphasis on taking care of their differences.”

Differentiated Instruction in China. Chen (2019) pointed out that the earliest research on differentiated instruction in China can be traced back to the famous educator Confucius, who advocated that teachers should “teach each student according to their aptitude”, so that every student can maximize their learning. Differentiated instruction inherits Confucius’s educational philosophy, but it has undergone new developments these recent decades. There are some differences between these two theories. Huang (2010) mentioned that the main form of education at Confucius’s time was individual education, but the differentiated instruction today is based on class teaching. Confucius' theory emphasized teacher-centered, while differentiated teaching focus more on student-centered and it tends to design various learning activities for students to meet their different needs so as to promote their maximum development.

China's research on differentiated instruction began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this period, due to the popularization of compulsory education, more and more students entered schools. Some educators have gradually discovered that differences between students have a significant impact on teaching effectiveness, so Chinese academics began to give differentiated instruction more attention.

Among all the scholars, Professor Hua Guodong is considered as the most comprehensive scholar in discussing differential instruction. In the 1990s, in response to China's long-standing

"one size fits all" education situation, which was not conducive to maximizing the development of each student and cultivating various types of outstanding talents, Hua (2001) proposed "differentiated teaching".

Subsequently, Jiang Zhi (2004) further enriched Professor Hua Guodong's concept of differentiated teaching. He pointed out that teachers should take students' differences into consideration in class teaching and adjust teaching goals, content, methods and strategies to meet students' different learning needs.

The Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China (2007) also stipulates that teachers should treat students equally and should pay attention to individual differences among students. It reflects that the Chinese government attaches great importance to meet the different learning needs of students.

Difficulties in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Even though the English teachers in China recognized the importance the of differentiated instruction, this teaching method has not been widely used in the English classes around China. Under the current educational background in China, there are several difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction.

Firstly, the student numbers are so large in Chinese classes that teachers could not take care of each individual's need. Small class teaching is a prerequisite for differentiated teaching. However, Chen (2018) stats that according to the Chinese government's education report, there are two main class sizes in China. The first one is the super class size with 66 students. The second one is a large class size with 56 students. It's shown that in 2017, there are 86000 of super-size classes, taking up 2.4% of all classes and there are 368000 large class size, accounting for 10.1% of all classes in China. It is no doubt that it is not conducive to put differentiated instruction into

practice in such a large number of classes. Boyle did research and found that “when there are more than 30 students in each class, teachers shift their focus from individual attention to class control” (Bi et al., 2009). Teachers are reluctant to adopt this teaching method because it is hard for them to manage the class and it takes lots of time to make interaction with each of them. In Zhou’s (2019) research, 70% teachers of one primary school in Qingdao province, China, expressed that there were too many students in a class and the teachers have to teach more than two class, it’s impossible for the teachers to take care of every student. Huang (2010) also pointed out that although teachers have the concept of differentiated teaching, they have no choice but to engage in collective teaching due to the large number of students.

Secondly, Yang (2020) points out that from the perspective of the evaluation system, the current education still follows the traditional mechanism and use the same standards to assess and evaluate students. In Xie’s research, one of the English teachers claimed that she prepared the lesson with different kinds of materials, but the test result remains stagnant. She was frustrated that it was challenging to use this method in classrooms that only valued test scores. The same situation also happened in Hongkong. Wan (2020) pointed out that the teachers and the parents do not support to use differentiated instruction because Hong Kong highlights the importance of examination in its culture. In the inland China, under the college entrance examination system, score is still the only criterion for measuring students’ performance. Under such circumstances, few English teachers would care about the diverse needs of students, which will definitely hinder the development of differentiated instruction in China.

Thirdly, English teachers are aware of the importance of implementing differentiated instruction, but they receive less training of it. Liu (2017) conducted a survey on the understanding of differentiated teaching among 1929 primary and secondary school teachers in Shanxi Province,

it can be seen from the survey data that teachers agreed on the importance of differentiated instruction. However, even though teachers are aware of the advantages of using differentiated instruction to teach English in the class, there is no systematic training in China for teachers to learn how to carry out differentiated instruction activities. Chen (2022) investigated 47 teachers from Shanghai Experimental Cambridge Foreign Language School, the result showed that the correlation coefficient between teachers who receive professional training for two or more days and their attitudes towards using differentiated instruction during the teaching process is 0.371. It can be seen that the professional training received by teachers often affects their use of differentiated instruction in the teaching process. Since the teachers have not acquired such relevant knowledge and skills, they lack sensitivity to use differentiated instruction when they are teaching the lessons. Therefore, there are certain difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction.

Fourthly, teachers' belief in using differentiated instruction influences the implementation of it. Some teachers find it is difficult to carry out differentiated instruction in the class and could not see the benefits brought by this method. They remain skeptical about the outcome and refuse to use this method. According to DeLuca et al. (2019), teachers' perceptions about students' learning and diversity may influence their ways to instruct the classroom. Suprayogi et al. (2017) conducted a survey of 604 teachers and found out that the teacher's belief in using differentiated instruction plays a critical role for implementing this teaching method.

Fifthly, some parents don't want their children to be treated differently and oppose this teaching method. Sun (2021) mentioned that some parents of a school in Shenzhen have complained to the Education Bureau for the school using differentiated instruction, which they think will label their children and undermine their learning confidence. This teaching was

suspended after only three days of implementation. In another case, according to Liu (2020), the affiliated high school of Wenzhou education college conducted English differentiated instruction for the first-year high school students in 2003 to explore the pros and cons of this teaching method. The experimental results showed that differentiated instruction was beneficial for middle and high-level students to improve their motivation and confidence, but it did not have a positive impact on students with lower grades. Instead, it affected their self-esteem and lowered their confidence.

The most questionable aspect of differentiated instruction is that it artificially labels some students as "inferior" and causing harm to those students with learning difficulties. One important reason for causing this situation is that parents and teachers hold different perspectives. They are all pursuing the better development of students, but parents are more concerned about whether their children receive the same teaching resources in school, which is viewed from a fair perspective. Teachers and schools mainly aim to help students make their progress based on individual differences, which is considered from the perspective of teaching effectiveness. According to Sun (2021), there is a contradiction between the professionalism of education and the non-professional understanding in society. This disagreement between parents and society hinders differentiated instruction from moving in the right direction.

Differentiated Instruction and Primary School Students

Even though there are some difficulties to implement differentiated instruction, it is still of great importance to use this method for primary school students because differentiated instruction can benefit them in a variety of ways. The author will refer to some theories to illustrate why differentiated instruction is important for primary school students.

Firstly, differentiated instruction can build up primary students' confidence in learning English. Ryan & Deci (2000) mentioned that according to self-determination theory, if the learners

can learn at their own pace, they would feel more capable and are more willing to participate in the learning process, which can lead to an increase in their self-confidence and motivation to learn. Teachers can allow students to make decisions by themselves, it will enhance their initiative in learning and make them feel empowered. Through this way, they will experience success more frequently and they will become more responsible for their learning outcomes. In other hand, according to Vygotsky's ZDP, the gap between what the learner can figure out by themselves and what they can do with the help from a knowledgeable person, this person can be the teacher, or the peer. Since every student's ZPD is different, some students learn fast while the others learn slowly, differentiated instruction can provide different levels of tasks and activities to challenge them within their ZPD. In this way, differentiated instruction can be seen as the practical way to apply ZPD theory. When the students achieve their upper level, they will feel the sense of achievement, and hence become more confident and are more willing to keep challenging themselves to the next learning stage. The primary students' needs more encouragements than other ages of students, when they are receiving positive feedback from teachers, it will enhance their recognition in themselves and boost their confidence in English learning.

Secondly, differentiated instruction can help the primary students to develop a deeper understanding of concepts and improve their ability to apply what they had learned. Piaget (1952) put forward the theory of Constructivism which emphasize the importance of learners' initiative. It advocates that children gradually construct knowledge about the external world in the process of interacting with their surroundings. In the process of constructing, students will actively collect and analyze relevant information, propose various hypotheses about the learned problems, and work hard to verify them. Differentiated instruction supports this theory by allowing students to engage in learning activities that are tailored to their unique needs and abilities, which can help

them construct their own understanding of the material. Constructivism emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the learning process. Collaborative learning, group work, and peer feedback are all important components of constructive learning environments. Differentiated instruction can help to facilitate these kinds of interactions by grouping students based on their learning needs and interests.

Thirdly, differentiated instruction can improve primary students' academic achievement. Dr. Howard Gardner's (1983) developed the Theory of Multiple Intelligences, which claimed that individual has at least seven different intelligences. It includes speech intelligence, mathematical logic intelligence, music intelligence, space intelligence, body movement intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, self-awareness intelligence. By knowing well of each individual's predominate intelligence, the teacher can prepare some correspondent activities to help the students learn better. For those who are in music intelligence, the teacher could provide some music for them during the learning process. Learning with chant, song and rhythm would be enjoyable for them. For those who are strong in body movement intelligence, teachers could adopt total physical response teaching method, and this will help the students focus on learning. Students' learning outcome would be maximized when the teacher recognizes learners different learning styles and offers differentiated instruction. This can lead to students' increased effort on learning and gain better academic achievement.

Effective Strategies for primary school teachers to use differentiated instruction in English class

The implementation of differentiated teaching needs to consider students' differences, and teachers need to design different activities to stimulate the learning enthusiasm of each student. But the implementation of this teaching method is quite difficult. To address these shortcomings,

the author summarizes the following strategies for the teachers to refer to. [OBJ]

Understand individual differences among students. Understanding students' differences is a necessary prerequisite for using differentiated instruction. Before implementing differentiated instruction, teachers need to have a comprehensive understanding of their students. There are many ways to get to know the students.

Different students have different learning styles. In Zhang's (2020) article, the researcher set up a questionnaire to identify students multiple intelligences. The results showed that in the experimental class, among those 58 students, there are 35 students who are strong in visual-spatial intelligence and there are 28 students demonstrating bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. Musical intelligence and interpersonal intelligence shared the third place with the same number of 24 students. It implies that students in this class would like to learn English with pictures, videos, songs or games. When preparing the lesson, teachers might give more priority to these kinds of resources. In addition, as the data shown, interacting with partners during the learning process would facilitate their learning. Thus, teachers could provide some pair-work or group work activities for the students to participate in. What's more, the teachers could also group the students based on their intelligence and assign different tasks for the different groups to explore. Teachers could bear in mind, for example, what kind of activity is suitable for those who rely on pictures to gain knowledge, or what kind of activity is suitable for those who are sensitive to movement. When it comes to the lesson, the teacher could well challenge these students with the preset tasks. According to Zhou (2022), by considering students' learning preferences and intelligence types, teachers can mobilize students' enthusiasm for participating in classroom learning and guide them to achieve better learning outcomes in the way they excel.

Apart from setting up an intelligence questionnaire, teachers can also review students' past

performance and conduct questionnaires to gain a deep understanding of students' knowledge foundation, learning ability level, personality characteristics, language expression ability, and other aspects. Only when the teachers get closer to the students could they put differentiated instruction into practice and the students might benefit more from the lesson.

Use diverse evaluation to assess students' performance. In traditional primary school English teaching, many teachers use the same standard to evaluate students' learning effectiveness. Getting a high score is considered as the most important thing in English learning. But for those who are not talented in learning English and for those who could not perform well in paper tests, it seems that they are more likely to lose their interest in learning English if they get a poor test result. What's more, as the elementary school students are still in the stage of building their thinking ability and self-confidence, and poor exam results can also undermine their confidence in learning English. Thus, it's important for the teacher to use different ways to assess students' performance based on students' differences and combine summative evaluation with formative evaluation. Under differentiated instruction, teachers should shift the focus on students' academic rankings to their improvement and development. By building confidence in learning, students will gradually be willing to accept challenges, actively expand their ability, and cultivate growth thinking.

In Zhou's (2022) article, the author suggested that teachers should customize personalized learning evaluations. For different levels students, teachers should provide them with different questions, tasks or assessments and assess the students based on their own origin starting point, instead of using the same standard to gauge each student. For those students with weaker learning ability, teachers could assign basic exercises for them to consolidate knowledge and build up learning confidence. For this level students, teachers should pay attention to their progress and

give them encouraging evaluation. For those students with higher level learning ability, teachers should pay attention to inspiring them, guiding them to apply what they have learned to solve the problems in real life, and transfer their learning to achieve innovative expression. For this level students, teacher should concern more about their ability to use English to think and to express themselves.

In addition, Chen (2019) suggested that the participants for evaluating students could be different people. In the past, teachers were usually the only participants to evaluate students. In differentiated instruction, teachers, parents, peers and even students themselves could participate in the evaluation. It will help students to gain evaluation from different aspects. Teachers would evaluate the students based on their existing level and give them professional evaluation. Peers would notice the different thinking from their partner's expression and evaluate them from their own perspective. This helps to stimulate students' enthusiasm for participating in evaluation. Evaluation from parents could not only give support to students' learning, but also help the teachers to get to know well of each student. Since teachers could not take care of every student in the classroom, evaluation from parents is particularly important for the implementation of differentiated teaching. Self-evaluation helps students to organize their knowledge and check if they have mastered what they have learned. Learner's self-evaluation provides teaching feedback to teachers and helps teachers to adjust their teaching and make teaching decisions.

Summary

To sum up, after referring to the resources about differentiated instruction at home and abroad, some valuable research has been synthesized. The development of differentiated instruction has gone through five stages in American. The American scholar Carol Ann Tomlinson was the representative for developing the theory of differentiated instruction. In China,

differentiated instruction is influenced by the Confucian beliefs. Hua Guodong is considered as the representative scholar in the field of differentiated instruction in China.

It's not easy to implement this teaching method in China, because there are so many obstacles to put this teaching method into practice, such as the large class size, single evaluation system, lack of teacher training and parents' complaints. But there are lots of advantages for using this teaching method for primary school students, and English teachers in China know the importance of implementing differentiated instruction in today's teaching. Some researchers found the effective strategies for the English teachers to teach primary school students. It's suggested for the teachers to understand individual differences among students and use diverse evaluation to assess students' performance.

Chapter 3 Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

With the development of society, the differences in students' English proficiency will become increasingly apparent. The author found that some students have already been exposed to English in kindergarten, while some students have no English foundation before entering first grade. Students with good foundations learn faster, while students with weak foundations struggle to learn. In addition, the degree that parents attach importance to English learning and the differences among students themselves, such as personality traits, learning habits, and learning styles, all affect the effectiveness of teaching.

Differentiated instruction advocates respecting students' differences, which requires teachers to consider students' existing abilities and potential development levels when designing teaching, so that every student can make progress in their ZDP. Currently, although some schools have begun to explore differentiated instruction, this teaching method has not been truly implemented in China due to various factors. Therefore, in the future, how to implement differentiated teaching will be a key research topic for primary school English teachers

Recommendations

In order to foster the implementation of differentiated instruction in English class, all parties in the society should make their own contribution to it.

The education regulatory department should create conditions for English differentiated instruction, such as reducing the number of classes, providing specialized training, forming expert teams for differentiated instruction research, and guiding schools to explore differentiated instruction. On the one hand, as practitioners of differentiated teaching, teachers can develop primary school English school-based curriculum textbooks based on the differences of their own students. Teachers can also use different teaching methods to design learning activities and provide

students with diverse learning choices to meet the needs of individual students. On the other hand, teachers also need to help parents update their educational concepts, eliminate their negative perceptions of differentiated instruction, and have them know that differentiated teaching does not mean to treat students differently. On the contrary, differentiated teaching provides students with the greatest fairness. Parents should recognize and respect students' differences and cooperate with teachers to help students actively participate in the learning process and maximize their learning.

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