



How Teachers Apply Differentiated Instruction in Class

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Introduction

Nowadays Differentiated Instruction (DI) is becoming more and more crucial in public schools because of students' varied learning styles, entry behaviors, and prerequisite capacities. From my personal teaching experience, the achievement gaps of English acquisition start as soon as students attend their first grade. To seek for the solution, I have participated in several workshops in DI, hoping for easy and efficient answers. As the clock ticked, however, I was not really motivated to apply it in my own class. Thanks to all the efforts from Education Department, and English Curriculum & Instruction Consulting Team, New Taipei City, I had an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit eight extraordinary public schools in Massachusetts and New Jersey in the USA. In these schools, teachers apply DI in different subjects and topics, which engage students' full attention during class.

Definition of Differentiated Instruction

As Carol Ann Tomlinson said, differentiation means giving students multiple options for taking in information (1999). Differentiated instruction (DI) means that you observe and understand the differences and similarities among students and use this information to plan instruction. Also, "Differentiated instruction is not the same as individualized instruction. Every student is not learning something different; they are all learning the same thing, but in different ways. And every student does not need to be taught individually; differentiating instruction is a matter of presenting the same task in different ways and at different levels, so that all students can approach it in their own ways" (Trujo, 2004).

Laura Robb, the author of many best-selling books for teachers, has offered a list of some key principles that form the foundation of differentiated instruction.

1. Recognition of diverse learners: the students we teach have diverse levels of expertise and experience with reading, writing, thinking, problem solving, and speaking. Ongoing assessments enable teachers to develop differentiated lessons that meet every student's needs.

2. Group Work: Students collaborate in pairs and small groups whose membership changes as needed. Learning in groups enables students to engage in meaningful discussions and to observe and learn from one another.

3. Problem Solving: the focus in classrooms is on issues and concepts rather than "the book" or the chapter. This encourages all students to explore big ideas and expand their understanding of key concepts.

4. Choice: Teachers offer students choice in their reading and writing experiences and in the tasks and projects they complete. By negotiating with students, teachers can create motivating assignments that meet students' diverse needs and varied interests.

Summary of Classroom Visitation and Observation

Josiah Quincy Elementary School was the first school I visited in Massachusetts. It opened in Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center in 1976. It was designed and built with no walls between the classrooms in order to create a better environment for communication. I was invited to Grade 3, Ms. Tondorf's class. There were 15 students having their reading class in a bright and quiet place. Ms. Tondorf divided her class into four groups named by colors. She set four stations and each group spent 20 minutes in one station learning alone or with assistance. These four stations were managed as following.

1. Meet with Ms. Tondorf : students wrote their reading log with the teacher's help.

2. Technology Center: students read online and listened to the audio material.

3. Fluency Center: students said the word or the phrase on cards to each other.

4. Read to Self: students read independently in their classroom library.



Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School was another example using DI in class. It is a tuition-free public school for the Pioneer Valley region in Massachusetts, featuring Chinese language acquisition by using Chinese as the language of instruction during a portion of the day. Students get enrolled by lottery in kindergarten, Grade 6, and Grade 9. During the visitation, I was able to observe both an ELA (English Language Arts) class and a CLA (Chinese Language Arts) class. In the former class, the students from Grade 4 were separated into two groups. Most of the students stayed with Mr. Charlton in the front of the classroom making sentences with the new vocabulary of the day while the other four students were practicing parts of the speech with another teacher in the back of the classroom. The latter one was a Grade 2 CLA class. The students were arranged in two groups practicing writing or speaking. The writing task was operated individually while the speaking task was instructed by the teacher as a whole team.

Another outstanding illustration of DI occurred in Howell Township Public Schools, New Jersey. In this district, all students are equipped with a laptop as academic use. The students are allowed to take the laptops home when they turn

to be the 5th graders. In Ramtown Elementary School, Mrs. Jones was using a self-paced learning tool to monitor her students' progress while they were editing their own presentation report. In Middle School South, Mrs. Cleveland provided five diverse stations for her 7th graders to observe or experiment on the same topic in the science class.

My last observation of DI was in Mrs. Komal's science class in Freehold Intermediate School, New Jersey. Mrs. Komal designed her curriculum from varied aspects, including reading, writing, illustrating and organizing. The students were on tasks in small groups and asked for the teacher assistance whenever they needed it.



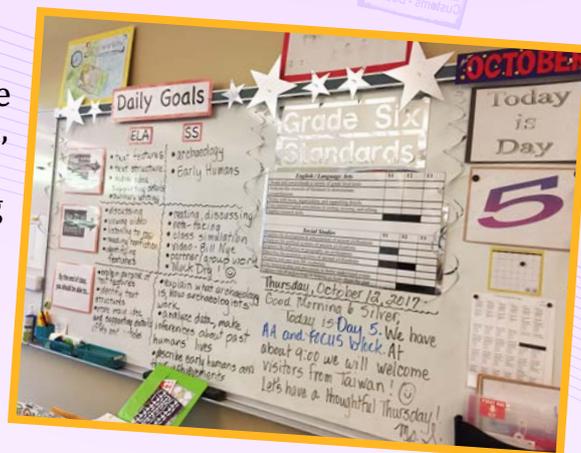
How Classroom Environment Help Differentiated Instruction

Among the classroom visitations, I found some common features in the classrooms which help DI function better.

1. Air-conditioning: Air-conditioners are equipped instead of opening windows or fans. Closed windows keep noise out so students do not get distracted easily. Also, students are more likely to generate their attention on tasks under a moderate temperature.

2. Rugs: I saw at least a rug in every classroom. Students like spending time on the rug listening to stories, using their laptop or even lying on it to do some writing. They do not sit on chairs for the whole day.

3. Informative classroom posters: walls in the classrooms are covered with posters or students' work such as learning objectives, problem solving steps, class rules, homework assignments and etc. Students are surrounded by an informative environment so they can learn even when they are just looking around.



4. Classroom libraries: Abundant books in diverse topics and genres are placed in homerooms. Students are encouraged to read as often as possible. Reading is definitely the best way to learn a language.

5. Technology support: Laptops are provided in most classrooms. Students are proficient in the use of computers as academic tools. Teachers are able to collect and grade assignments in a more efficient way so they can save time to meet more students' needs.

How I Plan to Apply Differentiated Instruction

1. Get to know as much as possible about each student: the first and hardest step is to learn about each student's background. I have nearly two hundred students with a wide range of academic skills, interests, English language proficiency levels, and cultures. I will continually assess to identify my students' strengths and learning styles to help them move forward.

2. Have higher expectations for all students: all teachers know more or less about Pygmalion Effect, which refers to the idea that a teacher's expectations about the students can eventually lead to an increase in performance. I will think of ways to help students understand key material and "show what they know" in ways that match their language proficiency levels.

3. Have a variety of research-based instructional strategies: students learn best when instruction matches their needs and learning styles. Although it is obligated to use the "one-size-fits-all" textbooks, I will design different types of tasks for my students.

4. Use ongoing assessment to guide instruction: no student likes tests, so it is vital to set up ongoing and informal assessment to match instruction to my students' changing needs.

5. Provide multiple types of assessment: every student needs an opportunity to demonstrate what he/she knows which helps them gain confidence and interests in learning.

6. Differentiate homework: since the students have different English language proficiency levels, it is necessary to give them differentiated assignments so that they will be able to complete successfully.

7. Differentiate through groups: keeping groups flexible allows me to match students with different peers for different types of activities. Sometimes heterogeneous grouping works, but sometimes homogenous grouping can also be an effective way to differentiate. I must be aware of why I structure groups in the certain way. "Sometimes in a novel- or literature-based project, it might be appropriate to differentiate by grouping into reading level. That way, I can take groups that need intensive work and ensure they are getting the instruction they need. I think teaming should be intentional." (Andrew Miller, 2012) I will try differentiating for academic ability, for collaboration skills, for social-emotional purposes, or even for passions.

8. Make content comprehensible for all students (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008): providing my students with alternative ways of accessing key content (e.g., charts, books written in their first language, simplified text written by the teacher, discussion, etc.) allows them to learn the same material as other students as they continue to develop their English language skills.

9. Use reflection and goal setting: reflection is an essential component. Students should be reflecting on their work and setting goals for further learning. This is a

great opportunity for them to set personalized learning goals and for me to target instruction specific to the goals they set. By this way, I am able to design activities to support students in learning not only what they want, but also what they need to know.

10. Use mini-lessons: some students cannot generate their attention through the whole period of class, so it is important set up mini-lessons for them. A mini-lesson can be a short story, a simple drawing or a listening and speaking task.

11. Balance teamwork and individual work: teamwork and collaboration are essential skills for my students, however, I need to leverage collaboration as much as content. There are times when individual instruction and practice may be needed. I need to differentiate the learning environment because some students learn better on their own while others learn better in a team. I believe that all students need time to process and think alone just as much as they need time to learn from their peers. I will make sure to balance both so that I am able to support a collaborative environment while allowing time to meet students on an individual basis.

Conclusion

As the society and environment change fast, teachers are facing more challenges than ever all over the world. With the development of Internet, gaining knowledge and education is no longer an obstacle for most people. If a person is determined to master in one skill or language, he/she is able to discover hundreds of websites, articles, and videos about the topic on the Internet. Education occurs anytime and anywhere if one person desires to. Therefore, it is vitally important for teachers to acquire new strategies and methods to motivate the students to explore.

This year, it was my great honor to be chosen as a member in the New Taipei City education delegation to visit some public schools in the USA. Through authentic classroom visitation and observation, I was able to interact with the local teachers and students. What impressed me most was the peaceful but full-of-curiosity atmosphere in the classrooms. The teachers and students rarely raised their voices during class. They were willing to listen to each other carefully and respectfully.

Meanwhile, most of the students were able to concentrate on the tasks they were assigned and manage to solve the problems.

Compared to the districts I visited in the USA, I have relatively limited support and resources from my school. I believe, however, now I am more capable of applying differentiated instruction. Also, I am going to invite my colleagues to join the journey with me.

Reference

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