

**DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM FOR
21ST CENTURY NEEDS**

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Abstract

The paradigm shift from the industrial age to information age has necessitated many changes in the education system across the world. Education is expected to be inclusive and student centered, providing opportunities for every learner to develop skills and competencies appropriate for being a capable citizen in the 21st century by progressing at his or her suitable pace. In this context, among the various methods of instruction being experimented, differentiated instruction with specialized or personalized scaffolding is gaining attention and approval by many educationists. Differentiated Instruction is tailoring instruction to meet individual needs in a diverse or a mixed able classroom. It is not a curriculum, but it is a teaching approach in which educational content, process, and product are adapted according to student readiness, interest, and learning profile. It is a strategy that recognizes and supports individual differences in learning. The present paper is based on the experiences and observations of the research scholar while using differentiated instruction strategies in a rural government school in Andhra Pradesh, for enabling the learners overcome their fear of English and initiate them on the journey of individual learning.

Teaching is a not a profession, it is a passion. Many of the challenges and difficult issues in education can be faced constructively and overcome by passionate teachers (Robert Fride). The passion to develop the learners and their learning led to many revolutionary changes in English language teaching. The traditional “chalk and talk” method of teaching that has persisted for hundreds of years is now disappearing and the new trends are taking shape in the changing

scenario. Emphasis on communication has paved the way for alternate methods to meet the varying needs and interests of the learners. In accordance with the paradigm shift in education which is deemed essential to prepare the learners for the ‘unmapped’ future, radical transformation in the field is being striven for.

Permanence is out of question in this transforming world. Every system needs alterations. Sometimes it should be completely removed, or sometimes it should be reformed. Once a teaching method might be successful, but now it needs to be adjusted with the changing world. This paper focuses on the findings in one of the areas, the need for ‘inclusive ‘teaching –learning environments through tiered or differentiated learning from the school level in order to foster self-learning, enhance the innate skills and kindle confidence in not just a select group of learners by ‘sorting’ but in ‘all the learners’ for greater equity and equality in the long run.

It is well known that awareness of the cultural, economic, social, emotional, and intellectual diversities in the learners and the strides in technology have created many challenges as well as solutions. Even in our country, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Task Based Instruction/Learning (TBL), Content Based Instruction/Learning (CBL), Problem Based Learning (PBL), Project Based Learning (PBL) Differentiated Instruction, Sheltered English Instruction (SEI), and the recent Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) are some of the many successful methods in this era.

The differences between these instructions appear in their approach, activities, and implementation. But the underlying objective for all these instructions is to develop students’ language learning and critical thinking skills and ultimately make them individual learners. The benefits of all hybrid methods of learning are self-paced learning, self-directed learning, the exercising of various senses and the ability to represent content in a variety of media. Where ever pair work and group work is promoted, interpersonal skills are also encouraged.

In the Task Based Instruction, specific tasks which are connected to real life situations are planned and implemented in the classroom to develop communicative competence including linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. The target language will be the means to an end rather than the goal itself. The target language becomes the medium through which some new content is learned in Content Based Instruction. The learners are engaged with more content; it promotes motivation and advanced thinking skills. It focuses less on language structures but more on using language to learn the content. Intrinsic motivation drives the learners to use language.

To make the non-native English speaking students compete with the native English speaking students in the mixed classroom, Sheltered English Instruction was adopted by the content-area teachers in 1980’s in United States. The non-native speakers are separated for a while from the mainstream and given scaffolded teaching. This instruction has also become popular in foreign language teaching classes. The low language proficient students are given a separate instruction and made to compete with the proficient students.

The rapid growth in internet and mobile technology led to Web Based Instruction, Mobile Based Instruction, and SMS Based Instruction. These methods incorporate individual learning and they are free from time and space. The advantages of these instructions are to teach the learners outside the classroom, sustain the motivation, individualize instruction, and provide access to information tools. Apart from all these methods, committed, innovative and passionate teachers derive their own methods, blending different methods into one and make it unique which ultimately suits their learners’ needs.

Differentiated Instruction is tailoring instruction to meet individual needs. Diverse student factors are taken into consideration and strategies are developed to maximize individuals' learning experience. The teachers adjust the curriculum and instruction to reach every student in the class. All the above mentioned methods like TBL, PBL, CALL, SEI, MALL and many others also can be used by a teacher in the differentiated learning environment where every learner becomes the centre and no one stays at the periphery of learning.

The paradigm shift from the industrial age to information age has necessitated many changes in the education system across the world. In order to prepare the learners to face new challenges and meet diverse needs, new curriculum standards have been developed. An addition of 4 Cs – communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity to the traditional 3 Rs – reading, writing, and arithmetic has demanded the reinvention of schools. What we knew about the curriculum, the teacher, and the learner is completely altered. The curriculum is not textbook-driven or fragmented, but it is thematic, project-based and integrated. Students learn the skills through their research and application in their projects. Knowledge is not memorization of facts and figures, but it is constructed through application and connected to previous knowledge, personal experience, interests, talents, and passions. The role of the teacher is transferred from a dispenser of information to orchestrator of learning and helping students turn information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom. Assessment is also moved from regurgitation of memorized facts and disconnected processes to demonstration of understanding through/ in a variety of contexts.

The paradigm shift in education is being considered seriously all over the world, by all developed as well as developing countries including India. Consequently, like many states in India, the undivided Andhra Pradesh state government developed and designed Andhra Pradesh State Curriculum Framework -2011 in tune with the National curriculum Framework – 2005. The vision and mission of the government is reflected in its objectives, mainly to provide high quality education for all the children in the state, make them responsible and sensible to the key issues like environment and human relations. The curriculum is designed (more or less in the CBSE model) to develop their critical thinking and questioning skills, promote their listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills, and provide meaningful teaching and learning experience in natural and friendly way. It encourages collaborative learning, defines the role of teachers as facilitators and reflective practitioners. The syllabus is designed to develop skills in place of rote memorization. Instead of transferring knowledge from one to many to sharing of knowledge in all directions is given prior importance. The construction of knowledge should happen through self-exploration, social interaction, and sharing. The Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation model has been introduced to assess the learners and their progress on a continuous basis in place of the end written examinations.

Besides these reforms in the education system, the government is extending its economic support to the child and its family by providing books, education, uniform and food free to all who are taking their education in the government schools through mid-day meals scheme. But still there is a high dropout rate in enrollment. What is needed? What could be done? Does the education system need some more reforms and alterations? When would all the learners be equally enthusiastic participants in their learning process?

The researches over the last 25 years on differentiated instruction have proved that it can effectively meet the needs of individuals in a diverse or a mixed able classroom. It is not a curriculum, not a prescribed pedagogical content but a teaching approach in which educational

content, process, and product are adapted according to student readiness, interest, and learning profile. It is a strategy that recognizes and supports individual differences in learning.

According to Carol Ann Tomilson, it is the process of “ensuring that what a student learns, how he or she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he or she learned is a match for that student’s readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning.” Differentiation stems from beliefs about differences how they learn, learning preferences and individual interests (Anderson, 2007).

In contrast to the common approach “one fits for all”, differentiation is student centered, with a focus on utilizing appropriate instructional and assessment tools that are fair, flexible, challenging, and engage students in the curriculum in meaningful ways. Here the teacher can either choose multiple texts or materials, video or computer programmes, or go for a single text for varied activities.

As today’s classrooms are filled with diverse learners, many schools are implementing differentiated instruction to effectively address all students’ learning needs. Even though the research on differentiated instruction as a specific practice is limited (Allan & Tomilson 2000; Anderson 2007), solid research was done to provide the foundation on differentiation. A growing body of research on differentiated instruction shows that it can be effectively implemented in mixed-ability classrooms (Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008).

A research on the application and effects of differentiated instruction in K-12 classrooms in Alberta, Canada, has been found that differentiated instruction consistently yielded positive results across a broad range of targeted groups (McQuarrie, McRae & Stack-Cutler, 2008). Tieso (2005) studied 31 math teachers and 645 students and found that differentiated instruction was effective for keeping high-ability students challenged in heterogeneous classrooms. Lawrence-Brown (2004) concluded his research on the differentiated instruction that the instruction enables students with a wide range of abilities- from gifted students to those with mild or severe disabilities to receive an appropriate education in inclusive classrooms. Baumgartner, Lipowski, and Rush (2003) implemented differentiated instruction to improve reading and comprehension skills of elementary and middle school students. They found that the students improved their decoding, phonemic, and comprehension skills. Their attitudes about reading and their own abilities were also improved. The differentiated instruction method is best embodied in the work Carol Tomilson, whose books, videos, and DVD have been embraced by many school districts and professional developers in U.S.

Our classrooms are fully loaded with diverse students with varied capabilities and cultures. It has been considered by the researcher that differentiated instruction would work to cater the needs of our learners. So, as a part of doctoral research on “The Challenges in ELT in AP state Curriculum-2011”, eighth and ninth class Telugu medium students studying in a rural government high school in West Godavari District of A.P have been taken up for case study for the academic year 2014-15. This paper discusses the problems identified and the experiment done in differentiated learning or differentiated scaffolding and its outcomes.

As in any class, both the 8th and 9th classes have mixed able groups. Their ability in English language was tested at the beginning of the academic year through reading, speaking and writing. According to the academic standards mentioned in AP State Curriculum-2011, students of class eighth and ninth are expected to construct discourses, use appropriate and spontaneous language for everyday purposes, and be able to express their thoughts and knowledge in the targeted language. However, 75 per cent of the students’ skills match with the first or the second class children’s skills , namely, listening and responding, reading and comprehending,

descriptions, and constructing only simple conversations and the remaining students are at the third to the fourth standard level namely narrating stories, constructing discourses. In fact no student has the expected competencies matching their class.

There is a wide gap between the curriculum and the learners. There may be many policy problems that could be solved by the government. To mention a few points, this batch did not study English from class one, but the present text is a common one for both media. Teachers do not have sufficient training in handling the new syllabus. Sometimes the language learners are taught by the other subject teachers. It has been found that many students are scared of English as a 'subject' and their confidence levels are very low. To bring them to the required standard in a limited time is a utopian dream. Aiming at the average learner and teaching in one method for all would be harmful and it would surely worsen their condition further.

What could be done was to maximize every one's learning and develop their skills from where they were. Differentiated approach was considered for the experiment as it can ultimately benefit all the learners and cater to their needs. The students were grouped into two categories. Those who could just read and spell some simple words were identified as 'basic learners'. The other group who could read the text and comprehend the meaning a little was named as 'advanced learners'

As the maximum students were at a very basic level, attempts were made to familiarize them with English sounds, words, word pattern, and basic vocabulary. A two month programme was charted out and implemented in the beginning of the academic year for all the students in the class. Simple English rhymes were given practice to the students to make their speech organs free and flexible to English sounds. Basic vocabulary such as action words, names of flowers, fruits, animals, human body parts were introduced. Simple descriptions, simple role plays for self-introductions, introducing others, requesting, asking for information were practiced. Expressing the past actions, regular actions and continuous actions were also drilled. Different types of materials like pie diagrams, flow charts, visuals, songs, physical actions, translation games, riddles and the class room objects, all things that were available were used to create interest in the learners. An attempt was made to build the bridge between the learner and the language during the programme. This was like a 'bridge course' if one may use the term here. Many of the things which they ought to have learnt in their seven to eight years of schooling were provided.

By the end of the programme, it was found that their fear of English had been reduced and confidence was built that they too can understand or talk in English. Their speech organs were molded to produce English sounds though MTI could not be wiped out. The students who had good grasping but were poor at English language had moved from the basic group to the advanced group. The advanced learners were able to identify the difference between present actions and past actions and construct simple sentences with the help of the teacher. Instead of copying everything from the others, the basic learners developed independence in reading or writing simple words. They could not reproduce the sentences but could easily utter the given sentences. The two groups developed intimacy with the language and felt that the subject was in their reach.

At the end of the initial two month programme, it was observed that the students who were regular to school got benefited and stretched their language ability. Even though the content was same for all the students, the advanced learners got some idea and clarity in the process of language learning. After the two month programme, they were expected to study their prescribed syllabus. The researcher's objective was to take them through the entire text and provide them

the taste and the power of self-exploration. They should explore their own path but the exploration had to be clear and smooth, challenging but not with too many hurdles, creative and innovative, interesting and inspiring. The ultimate choice was going for ‘powerful and meaningful learning’.

Powerful learning’ is concentrating on the key concepts, big ideas, governing principles instead of going to every corner of the lesson or text. It will ultimately reduce the burden of both the teacher and the learners. It provides space for teachers to develop language skills leisurely in place of going hurriedly to complete the syllabus. Learners get sufficient time to absorb what they are learning. When learning appears meaningful and related to real life, it creates interest and inspiration in learners.

The single textbook prescribed for their study was chosen for teaching. It has eight units and each concentrates on one theme. Each unit covers all the four skills, vocabulary and grammar. As the textbooks for their study have familiar lessons, poems, and speeches, it became easy to have a wide variety of materials for the instruction. Movies, animated pictures, speeches were collected from internet and different tasks were designed. Materials selected for both the groups were the same but the tasks were different. Different worksheets were prepared for basic and advanced learners.

The exercises for basic learners initially included tasks as simple as identifying the alphabet and words from the text and filling in the blanks; singular noun forms were given and they were asked to find the plural form of the nouns in the lesson; present form of verbs were provided and learners were asked to find the past forms; an abridged form of the lesson was given and they were asked comprehension questions. Most of their tasks were based on recognizing and understanding the concept. Many a time they went for graphical identification. They found similarities in the letters and identified the answer. Videos available for some lessons were showed and learners were asked multiple choice questions and matching. They were shown a picture and given a task to write the objects that appeared in it. (A part of Oliver Twist movie was shown for eighth class students and their imagination was tested. A documentary on Hafeez Contractor in Telugu was shown and tasks were designed in English. The Chief Seattle’s speech in the form of a song was downloaded and shown to ninth class students and their comprehension was tested before starting the lesson. Then the lesson had become very familiar. The story of a lesson was jumbled and they were asked to arrange the points in the right order.) The advanced learners were given direct, indirect, interpretative, and application oriented questions. At first they were given simple and direct tasks, later they were taken to difficult tasks. Sometimes they found it tough but tried to stretch their ability. Pair work and group work activities were designed for both the groups suiting their levels.

After such differentiated instruction in the first two units, another step was taken and both the groups were given similar tasks. The exercises were carefully planned mixing simple and complex, direct and indirect questions. Many a time the researcher found complexity in matching the textbook with the learners’ abilities where many learners did not know even the past form of common action words like go, come, eat, etc. Some lessons in the textbooks are highly organized and informative. Various supporting materials were taken to sustain their interest and motivation. The experiment proved that in a differentiated instruction class, every learner emerges as a leader. The tasks are designed according to their abilities and level. So everyone finds the exercises relevant and suitable for his/her interests. This helps to build confidence and belongingness in learners. The basic learners who were once confined to copying the answers from the others became self-learners. They formed into a group and discussions went on and

findings were shared finally and they completed their tasks. The same thing happened in the advanced group also. They were encouraged to go for pair/group work, but the pairs/groups were not formed by the teacher. They found their partners whom they were comfortable with. Pair/group work created a sense of mutual respect, cooperation, and adjustment in the learners. The barrier between the teacher and the slow learners was easily removed. Activeness, brightness, and sparks of confidence in their eyes were clearly visible in place of idleness and confusion.

Differentiated instruction does not mean heavy and challenging work for advanced learners and light and easy tasks for struggling learners. Here both the learners get equal amount of exercises and tasks are challenging which pushes them from their comfortable zone and gives scope to stretch their knowledge. If the tasks are simple for the advanced learners, they make the learners bored and develop over confidence, finally it obstructs their growth. So the tasks were carefully designed where both the learners needed scaffolding from the teacher. All the efforts were put to maximize their learning experience. While the exercises were based on visuals, advanced learners tried to assimilate the meaning and basic learners went for imagination. Both these strategies worked well.

Using varied tools for instruction created interest and excitement in learners. Every lesson gave them a new experience and contributed in developing their skills. Some are good at listening, some are good at imagination, some are good at expression, and some are good at reading. The inherent talents were brought out by using different materials.

Initially, differentiated instruction in a large class seems to be difficult. Generally the large class is controlled either by assigning a lot of written work or following the policy ‘spare the rod, spoil the children’. As learners are involved and take responsibility for their learning, ‘Differentiated students’ make noise but it is meaningful and purposeful. Controlling the class was a nightmare for the teacher/researcher in the beginning of the academic year. But the differentiated instruction made the teacher’s job easy and simple. Sometimes the advanced students were given responsibilities to help the basic learners. It maximized their understanding and built a sense of community. As the tasks were built on the readiness of their level, their preferences, and the prior knowledge, effective and fruitful learning took place.

As in any CLT and SCL classes, the teachers are no more masters in the differentiated instruction classrooms. Teachers and learners both have equal challenges, and new experiences. They both learn continuously. Teachers’ job is not done just by inventing or designing an activity. They have to explore their students’ responses and learn how it works, where it fails, which is perfectly matched and so on. They should be ready for continual adjustments.

In the Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) model introduced in the AP State Curriculum – 2011, differentiated instruction makes the teacher’s job easier, quick, and perfect. The researcher realized that assessing a class of seventy students on a regular basis was not at all a boring task; rather it inspired to make alteration in teaching. A lot of difference was found in the teacher between the beginning of the day and the closing of the day. Every day was begun with a new tool. Every time the tool was changed, altered, or completely removed from the diary by the end of the day after objective introspection and self-assessment. Formative assessment is imbibed in this instruction. Differentiated instruction provided the teacher varied tools for assessment. Interactions with students, classroom discussions, and students work and their responses helped to understand where they were and how they were. Surely, sharing knowledge between a teacher and students helps their growth and promotes individual responsibility.

Teachers need to work sometimes with the whole class, sometimes with the small groups, sometimes with pairs, and sometimes with individuals. Different tasks demand different types of grouping. The choice of work depends on the nature of the task and the choice of the teacher and the learner. Group work and pair work was entirely new for the learners. It did mean making a noise for them in the beginning of the academic year. Differentiated instruction created a sense of community in them. They tasted the result of pair and group work. It made their work quick and easy. Individual work helped them to go on their pace. Both types of tasks worked very well. Unless the teacher has clarity on what is to be taught and how it is to be taught, learning is not meaningful and learners are also in a confused state. The objective of the class is to be planned before the teacher enters the class. Differentiated instruction itself has its aim in its implementation. As students are differentiated, tasks are also differentiated. Different tasks were prepared to reach the objective of the class. To teach the spellings and vocabulary, and develop comprehension and listening skills, both the learners got separate exercises suitable for their level. As everyone has their target which is not too much beyond their reach, the teacher's task is to check how the objective is fulfilled. Differentiated instruction is flexible and helpful for the language teacher in defining objectives, designing tasks, developing skills, and implementing them in the classroom.

Student centered instruction is the key concept in the new curriculum. Differentiated instruction is a blend of student centered instruction and task based instruction. The aim of this instruction is to expose the learner to the varied materials and draw out their inherent talents and develop their skills. No one is left behind!

The need for differentiated learning:

The gap between the learner and the curriculum is widened when the child moves mechanically year by year from class to another. The learner finds no enjoyment and meaning in education. An irreparable damage occurs once the learner reaches higher education. How does a student become professional without having basic knowledge in the subject? Finally our educational institutions remain as factories producing unskilled people. So the gap should be identified and bridged at the grass root level of education. But it should be a continual process because physical, emotional, and cultural values may vary from class to class and place to place. It should be a part of the curriculum; or else it should be a part of the teacher's objectives.

The training and placement departments have been established in every graduate college to make the students employable by providing training in effective communication, arithmetic, reasoning, and logical abilities in the final year of the graduation. The main goal for many graduates in their final year of study is to practice these skills in two or three months of time and get ready for placements. What a pitiful condition! If fifteen to sixteen years of education cannot produce a professional, then what is the meaning of education? The welcoming approach in differentiated instruction is it encourages students' individuality and self-learning. It develops self-responsibility in the learning process in the learners. Thus it leads to skill development. If the language and the mathematical skills are developed in the early stage of their education, they have sufficient time and enough foundation to define their goals and objectives in their future. The confidence that comes by having command on the subject will be helpful for them to aim high.

A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a new step. The basic step on the teachers' part is assessing their learners' capabilities followed by designing, implementation, alteration, and assessment. It may be a small step to the teacher but it will be certainly a giant

leap for the struggling learners. The label ‘dull or slow’ always makes their esteem low. When low self-esteem becomes a long-term problem, it can have a harmful effect on their mental health and their lives. Everyone in a differentiated classroom is an achiever, so the barriers between the high and the low disappear. It is time our teachers embraced differentiated learning techniques and developed inclusive learning at its best.

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