

The Perceptions Of Undergraduate Faculty Members Of Differentiated Instruction In Efl Classrooms At A Private University In Dubai

Running Title: -The Perceptions Of Undergraduate Faculty Members

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper will be to find out whether undergraduate faculty members are using differentiated instruction in their classes by reaching every student in the classroom that will result in upgrading education to high standards where no free riders in the classroom exist. The qualitative, phenomenological research approach that will be exploited in this research fits the research more than any other approach to achieve the target of the research. The tool that will be used in this qualitative research method to collect data will be the interview process because it will allow rich, and narrative text that will be required to respond to the research questions. The data that will be collected throughout this research will be organized, analysed, and coded within NVivo 8 software. It is expected that the outcomes of this study can be utilized to draw the attention and to raise the awareness for the need to adopt differentiated instructions as an effective approach instead of the methodologies they are currently being implemented in the teaching and learning in the UAE. The limitations of the study can be due to the limited number of the faculty members who will be interviewed

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

Classrooms have become more diverse in recent years; therefore, educational policy makers, teachers and school administrators are continually seeking new methodologies that accommodate such diverse population and mixed abilities. Differentiated Instruction (DI) is an approach that is targeted by many learning circles. This paradigm suggests that content to be delivered should be re-evaluated, grading the students according to their levels to become more involved in their learning process. Despite the fact that this approach is highly recommended by many researchers, there remains room for theoretical support to reinforce its validity and effectiveness. Within the context of increasing academic diversity, several researchers have examined differentiated instruction throughout their studies. This paper seeks to combine the research that call for adopting differentiation in classrooms and highlight the rationale that supports (DI). Previous investigations in this regard have shed light on students' diversity in classrooms in their learning styles, needs, interests and learning performances to implement this methodology in the classroom. While this paper focuses on these key aspects, it also presents a demand, for further investigations in certain areas.

This paper will also examine the perception of instructors towards differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction has not been explored by many researchers beyond theories; the understanding of the instructors' perceptions towards such strategy can help and support the move towards this promising learning approach in the classroom.

1.2. Problem statement:

Despite the fact that many researchers investigated Differentiated Instruction and to what extent educators use it, very few recorded if teachers have enough knowledge to use it in EFL classrooms and whether they had professional development on how to implement it in their classrooms. The information about teachers' perceptions of Differentiated Instruction in classrooms was not enough. Literature explained how successful this approach if implemented in classrooms, but the researchers did not record that much about the teachers' ability to implement it and their perception of such paradigm. Accordingly, to recognize teachers' perceptions of such strategy, this qualitative, phenomenological study is going to sightsee the teachers' perceptions of differentiated Instruction and their usage of it in their classrooms, and if they face any barriers, this study is going to reveal how teachers deal with such barriers.

1.3. Research Objectives

The main objective of this paper will be to find out whether undergraduate faculty members are using differentiated instruction in their classes by reaching every student in the classroom that will result in upgrading education to high standards where no free riders in the classroom exist. Its objectives will be:

- (1) To investigate how undergraduate faculty members implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms
- (2) To determine if any barriers to fully implement differentiated instruction exist
- (3) To explore strategies to overcome barriers to the implementation of differentiated instruction.

1.4. Research Questions:

The research questions that are to be investigated are

- (1) How do faculty members implement differentiated instruction in undergraduate courses?
 - (a) What barriers do they face? And
 - (b) How can these barriers be overcome?

1.5. Significance of the study:

This will be the first study to consider differentiated instruction in an undergraduate studies setting in the UAE as it will concentrate on teaching concepts rather than facts. In current EFL classrooms, diversity in students' needs, interests, learning performances exist, hence, it is the teachers' responsibility to meet the needs of the students. (Tomlinson, 1999). This study is going to promote Differentiated Instruction, furthermore, it will picture the perceptions of the teachers of such approach and the impact of using it in their classrooms. The study will present to what extent teachers use this paradigm in their classes and the difficulties they face and how they react to such difficulties.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Conceptual Framework

The social constructivist learning theory is viewed by several educationalists, researchers and school administrators. Literature indicates that Differentiated Instruction can never be reached unless we change the different aspects of the teaching process. The three-principle-basis derived from the literature review will lead this study and its progress. First, according to Vygotsky's and the grounded learning theory, the outcome of the good relationship and positive social interaction between the teacher and the students are the key to success. Second, that socializing within the learning context can create and lead to communication skills as well as development of cognitive functions. It is worth noting that positive teacher-student relationship significantly improves the intellectual activity of a student. The third principle, derived from studies about the function of the human brain and learning styles, acknowledges that learning can be maximized if the new concepts are associated with existing ones in a way in which students are allowed to consolidate data in a form that suits their learning styles

2.2. Theories and Models:

Differentiated instruction is referred to by many humanistic theorists (Dewey, 1997; Knowles, 1970; Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1983); however, in the conceptual base of this study, the focus will be on the views of Piaget (1951) and Vygotsky (1978) and the impact of constructivism on classroom interactions.

According to Piaget's (1978) theory of constructivism, the learning process of individuals is resulted from the social interactions with the surroundings where schema is built at every stage in life. In this theory, Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the fact that children develop within a context of social interactions. Additionally, Tomlinson (1999) and Gardner (1983) in their most recent theories emphasized the theoretical foundation and the exploration of differentiated instruction.

According to Carter (2009), the concept of constructivism comes from the fact that learners construct information themselves by exploring knowledge and not from other people or sources. Powell and Kalina (2009) had the same stand in which they stated that students grow stronger in group work that enables them to express their personalities. Furthermore, Sheehy (2002) emphasized that the best way to develop constructivism is group work rather than individual work.

2.3 Similar previous studies

The use of Differentiated Instruction has been shown by many previous studies. A study was conducted by Johnsen (2003). The context of the study was undergraduate teachers who were asked to implement differentiation. The student teachers were encouraged to differentiate material, content and strategies. The outcomes of the study proved to be positive for both, the undergraduate teachers who gained a satisfying experience, and the students who were engaged all the time as their interest was stimulated.

A case study was conducted by Tomlinson (1995) at one middle school revealed that teachers opposed the modification of instruction to meet the learners diversity. Additionally, there were administrative barriers represented in the refusal of the teachers being instructed by district officials, which affected self-efficacy of the teachers. Other barriers were the way teachers perceived Differentiated Instruction, they considered it as a passing style, the time needed to prepare the material, the problem of testing and the difficulty in assessments. (Tomlinson 1995). It has been observed that teachers

who implemented Differentiated Instruction confirmed that the acceptance of the new paradigm was not determined by the age, but rather the teachers' attitude towards change. (Tomlinson 1995).

In a study conducted by (Hodge, 1997), he investigated the impact of the implementation of Differentiated Instruction on learners' standardized tests, the perceptions of the teachers and their capabilities to meet the students' variance, he revealed that the students who were trained for tests through Differentiated Instruction achieved better in their Math's scores unlike their scores in reading. Besides, teachers' insights of whether they are able to meet the needs of the students' is not determined by which technique they implemented whether (DI) or the traditional one. (Hodge, 1997).

The study which was conducted by Blozowich (2001) showed that Differentiated Instruction is similar or might mirror tracking in which teachers try to provide for current classrooms. Through his research, he had come to discover that teachers vary their techniques and strategies in the classroom but prepare their lessons exactly the same way of a tracked lesson. He concluded that professional development aside with orientation for teachers on how they should implement such approach is badly needed. Blozowich (2001). In his research, (Robinson, 2004), suggests that the utilisation of Differentiated Instruction techniques requires further research, teamwork is needed to help teachers in their lessons' preparation with Differentiated Instruction incorporated. (Robinson, 2004).

2.4. Literature Review

2.4.1. Definition of Differentiated Instruction

Tomlinson (2009) defined Differentiated Instruction as a means to reach every student in the classroom and help them regardless to their learning performances. Since that time, many other researchers defined it in their own views. For example (Wilson, 2009) concluded two definitions for Differentiated Instruction: "The development of the simple to the complex tasks, and a difference between individuals that are otherwise similar in certain respects, such as age or grade" (p. 70). Furthermore, Butt and Kausar (2010) indicated, "Differentiated instruction is an approach to planning, so that one lesson may be taught to the entire class while meeting the individual needs of each child" (p. 107). All the definitions agree in one aspect: It is reaching every student in the classroom whatever his learning is. In his article, Logan explained that Tomlinson's (2001) differentiated instruction theory is basically depends on the fact that teachers highlight and shed light on what is necessary to achieve the objectives in a way that they meet the diverse students levels in assessment and instruction (Logan, 2011). Levy (2008) considered Differentiated Instruction as a way in which all students of the same learning outcomes were using the tool of DI. The process of reaching this target is not the same for each student as they are different in their learning performances. In her article, Anderson (2007) focused on not excluding any student in EFL classroom whatever his level is, high achiever or below level which cannot be done without the implementation of Differentiated Instruction by the teacher. According to Lauria (2010), the use of Differentiated Instruction in the classroom will help and motivate the struggling learners in the class to become successful ones. In her article Tomlinson (2009) considered having two students in the same class and learning in the same way is absolutely uncommon because of the individual differences that Differentiated Instruction cares about in a way that different levels of students mean different methods of teaching.

Ankrum and Bean (2008) clarified that "True differentiation means that the lesson focus will be different for each group" (p. 144).

2.4.2. Effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction

Before the implementation of Differentiated Instruction, an educator needs to have an idea about the levels of the students in the class. A study which was conducted by Butler and Van Lowe (2010) revealed the impact of using differentiated instruction in a math class, in which students were divided into two groups, the first group practiced Differentiated Instruction in their classroom, while the second group did not use it in their classroom. The findings of this study showed that the group that received differentiated instruction outperformed the other group in the final assessment which undoubtedly prove the role of implementing DI in classrooms. Bailey. J.P. Williams-Black (2008) deduced, "In return, using differentiated instruction will provide educators with a way for all students to fit within-the-cracks instead of falling-through-the-cracks in order to become successful individuals in today's society" (p. 134).

2.4.3. Implementation of Differentiation in EFL Classroom:

Literature shows that it is possible to implement Differentiated Instruction in classrooms if we change the teaching methodologies. According to (Smutney 2003 Lewis & Batts 2005), the major components of differentiation are the change of the material (content), adopting higher level thinking skills (process) and enabling the students put what they have learnt in usage (product) in an encouraging environment in which all students take part together including those who have learning problems. Before forming grouping in the classroom, teachers should account students' feelings. In his article, Heacox indicated that teachers should vary their methodologies and techniques in the classroom if they are willing to make their differentiation invisible. According to (Heacox 2002), it is advisable to seat students according to their interests, a student who is having a problem with a language and gifted in arts or whatever, should be seated with a

group of the same where arts is their favorite. The saying goes; Teachers will never teach students if they do not reach everyone.

Regardless to some teachers' experience in flexible grouping and have a good record in that, there are some techniques that could be utilized to better meet the students' needs:

Interest grouping in which teachers group their students according to their needs as well as their interests, if teachers can place their students according to their tendencies and interests, then the link for the new learning is established. (Gregory & Chapman 2007).

Peer-to-peer tutoring in which learners of the same group help each other in a way that we can say that it is a two-edge weapon, from the one hand, this will reinforce the helper's understanding of the subject and provides him/her with good experience, while from the other hand, it may be easier for the helpee to get knowledge from his classmate than from his/her teacher. (Gregory & Chapman 2007).

Cooperative learning: Differentiated Instruction can be implemented in EFL classroom through group work where there is an integration between social skills and cognitive skills side by side with a higher level of thinking as discussions are conducted to get information. (Gregory & Chapman 2007), they added, this will enhance both individual and group accountability through a learning experience.

Differentiated instruction is helpful for both, the teacher and the students, however, there are obstacles that face teachers to implement it in EFL classroom. In their study, Brian McGarvey and his colleagues (1997) found that despite the fact that teachers are trying to implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms, the majority of the teachers needed support and help incorporating a multiplicity of various different instructional skills. Teachers encountered many obstacles represented in how to plan their lessons and how to adapt their teaching strategies to meet differentiation in their classrooms. Additionally, many teachers did not succeed in tailoring the right material for the right level of students' attainment.

The study which was conducted by Tony Manson (1999) aimed to find out whether teacher-education programs targeted methods in dealing with the diversity in the classroom or not, the findings of the study revealed that there was a contradiction between what teachers needed to deal with the cosmopolitan classrooms and what the pre-service programs offered them, in other words, there was a mismatch between what is needed and what is offered.

In her research, Tomlinson accused the teacher-education programs of not preparing teachers for mixed ability classes and how to deal with such diversity. She added "pre-service teachers seldom, if ever, experience differentiated instruction in their teacher-preparation programs". The teachers reported that such programs were focusing on how to deal with the learners' behaviours and not with methods of teaching in the classroom.

3. Methodological framework

3.1 The need for an empirical search

The previous literature review on Differentiated Instruction highlights the importance and value of such promising paradigm in classrooms through restructuring classrooms to meet the diversity of the students' needs, levels and learning performances. Such philosophy is missing empirical validation. Despite the intensive research of the effectiveness and value of using this technique in classroom, the need is the implementation of this theory in practice to meet the needs of the students.

3.2 Research approach & Justification

Denzin & Lincoln considered qualitative research methods as a means in which a researcher can explore a phenomenon. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). They added that through qualitative research methods a researcher can collect data in which a researcher can use different methods for a general purpose. According to Denzin & Lincoln, meaning which is found through social experiences is explored by qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study is going to investigate teachers' perceptions of Differentiated Instruction as well as the barriers teacher may face and the teachers' reactions in overcoming them. A qualitative, phenomenological research approach will be suitable for this study because the perceptions and lived experiences will be explored through the data that will be collected from the interviews that will be conducted with the teachers. The responses of the teachers and the narrative data will be analysed so as to come up with the main ideas that target the research questions.

The qualitative, phenomenological research approach that will be exploited in this research fits the research more than any other approach to achieve the target of the research. The qualitative approach will be the most appropriate to explore the understanding and perception of teachers towards this topic. Furthermore, to obtain a clear picture of how teachers'

deal with barriers, narrative data will be vital. Thus, qualitative method will be the best to verify the perceptions of teachers and their experiences in this regard. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Although quantitative method helps in making things easier in the explanation of trends, misconceptions can never be verified through such approach, besides, in quantitative approach, there is no room for the participants to maintain rich narrative data that is required to deal with the research questions in a comprehensive way.

Typically, phenomenological research includes frequent access to investigate participants in order to acquire insight of the central phenomenon, while this study is going to use an in-depth interviews to come up with obvious and deep understanding of the participants' perceptions towards Differentiated Instruction. The interview will include questions that raise discussions. Follow-up questions will be asked to enable the participants broaden their answers, so discussions will be generated which adds a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives towards Differentiated Instruction. The phenomenological research design that will be exploited in this research will analyse, describe and interpret the understanding and perception of the participants of Differentiated Instruction. The context of this research study will be EAP programme at an undergraduate private university in Dubai. What makes the phenomenological research design as the most suitable in this qualitative research is the fact that the interviews will be the tool for collecting data about the participants' perceptions and the narrative inquiry regarding Differentiated Instruction.

3.3 Data collection method

The tool that will be used in this qualitative research method to collect data will be the interview process because it will allow rich, and narrative text that will be required to respond to the research questions. The interview questions will be open-ended form because it will not only enable the participants to broaden original answers, but it will also provide meaningful perceptions and beliefs regarding the Differentiated Instruction. Other methods such as surveys and questionnaires will not only prevent participants from the opportunity of explaining the personal experiences and perceptions, but such methods will limit data analysis process.

The study will be conducted at an undergraduate private university in Dubai. After getting the permission from the responsible circles at the university to conduct the study, the researcher will conduct interviews with seven from the faculty members at the EAP programme in which the interviews will be transcribed word for word into text form.

3.3.1. Site & Choice Justification

The study will be conducted at the Canadian University in Dubai. The researcher will do the study at this particular site because he is one of the faculty members at the EAP programme at this university. Besides, this is a cosmopolitan university in which the faculty members are from all over the world. At the Canadian University Dubai, the faculty members at EAP programme are around 10 from different countries which will help this study to examine different methodologies in different countries because each faculty member will reflect on the methodology used in his/her country.

3.3.2. Samples

The participants in this current study, with whom the interviews will be conducted, will consist of 7 faculty members, 4 of whom will be female, and 3 male. The participants are from different countries, Canada, Bulgaria, Egypt, England, Jordan, India and Ireland.

This sample is purposive and the researcher's target will be to see the perceptions of faculty members, who are from different countries, towards Differentiated Instruction and whether they faced any obstacles in implementing it and how their reactions to overcome such barriers were. The study will be like cross-cultural in which 7 representatives from 7 countries will explain how they see the implementation of Differentiated Instruction.

One of the characteristics of qualitative research is the small sample. (Patton, 2002) adds, instead of focusing on the amount of participants in a sample, the judgement should be whether or not the purposive sample support the research rationale and purpose. Accordingly, this study with its purposive sample of 7 participants will be appropriate to achieve the researcher's target by exploring the perceptions of the teachers towards the use of Differentiated Instruction.

3.3.3. Validity and Reliability

Worthen, Borg & White (1993) defines validity as if an instrument measures what it is supposed or intended to measure. Likewise, Creswell, (2005) states that an instrument's reliability is determined by its outcomes, in other words, various usage of an instrument with results which are alike. The interview questions will be the most suitable for this research as they will be enough to collect information concerning the participants' perceptions and experiences with Differentiated Instruction which is the main objective of this study. Additionally, the researcher's preference and bias will be evaded in the course of the interviews as the researcher will listen openly. (DiCocco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Regarding reliability of this study, it will be guaranteed in a number of ways. First, an interview procedure will be used to make sure that the participants will be asked the identical questions. Second, the structure and the clarity of the questions will be taken into account to ensure that the participants will comprehend them easily. (Creswell, 2005). Third, time and place of the interviews will be determined by the participants who are going to be interviewed so as to avoid any distractions that may affect their participation. Fourth, the researcher will take into consideration the participants' credibility before the start of every interview.

3.4. Data analysis

According to Denzin & Lincoln (2005), in the analysis of a qualitative data, a researcher should provide a description of the learnt information, target the themes through data analysis and present explanation inherent to the population the researcher is studying. During the course of data analysis, the researcher will come up with themes through the narrative text and data that will be collected which are very important to be understood by the researcher to address the questions of the research, statement of the problem and purpose of the study. The data that will be collected throughout this research will be organized, analysed, and coded within NVivo 8 software (QSR, 2007) using Moustakas' modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). NVivo 8 can be defined as a software program that analyses qualitative data (QSR). This program will help the researcher gather the collected data into a themed, controllable and coded data. According to Moustakas, (1994), Moustakas' version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis includes acquiring a complete explanation of participants' perceptions and views concerning the principal phenomenon. In the present study, the participants will be asked about their perceptions regarding Differentiated Instruction and if they face any barriers and how they react accordingly. Open-ended questions will be asked in addition to follow up ones to make sure that intensive investigation will take place regarding the principal phenomenon. The information that will be gathered from interviews will be transliterated into a form of a text. This text data from the transliterated interviews will be then saved within the NVivo 8 software program for additional analysis. (QSR, 2007). This saved data particularly the parts that will be considered as relevant to the research questions, will be recognized and given code words, or codes (QSR, 2007). Then, the codes will be analysed, and to create a meaning units, similar codes will be classified together. These meaning units will be grouped and lessened to some main themes. Themes will be classified into two parts: Themes that explain the definition of Differentiated Instruction according to the teachers' perspectives, and themes that present the way teachers use Differentiated Instruction in their classrooms. Once the themes that address the research questions will be established, description of the research questions will be synthesized which will lead to the development of the results.

3.5. Pilot study

The study will be conducted at the Canadian University in Dubai where 7 undergraduate faculty members will be the participants of the study. The research method will be qualitative. The qualitative approach will be the most appropriate to explore the understanding and perception of teachers towards this topic. Furthermore, to obtain a clear picture of how teachers' deal with barriers, narrative data will be vital. Additionally, qualitative method will be the best to verify the perceptions of teachers and their experiences in this regard. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

A qualitative, phenomenological research approach will be suitable for this study because the perceptions and lived experiences will be explored through the data that will be collected from the interviews that will be conducted with the teachers. The responses of the teachers and the narrative data will be analysed so as to come up with the main ideas that will address the research questions.

As for the data that will be collected throughout this research, it will be organized, analysed, and coded within NVivo 8 software (QSR, 2007) using Moustakas' modification of the Stevick- Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). NVivo 8 is a software program that analyses qualitative data (QSR). This program will help the researcher gather the collected data into a themed, controllable and coded data. According to Moustakas, (1994), Moustakas' version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis includes acquiring a complete description of participants' perceptions and views concerning the principal phenomenon. In this study it will be the undergraduate faculty, members' perceptions regarding Differentiated Instruction.

4. Conclusion

4. 1. The original contribution of the study

The current study is about Differentiated instruction which is a pedagogical methodology that increases students' performances. These performances have a deep impact on society and lead to a world that values and understands the concept of human differences; similar to the value of individual differences that exist in our classrooms. The contribution of this study is that it is hoped that this study will draw the attention of the participants to implement Differentiated Instruction in their classes as it is completely absent. Through my experience in teaching for more than 22 years in UAE schools, I do believe that the implementation of such promising method is badly needed to promote the teaching-learning process.

4.2. Expected outcome and possible limitations

It is expected that the outcomes of this study can be utilized to draw the attention and to raise the awareness for the need to adopt differentiated instructions as an effective approach instead of the methodologies they are currently being implemented in the teaching and learning in the UAE. The study will follow the following three steps to ensure the appropriate and effective implementation of DI: (a) starting with curriculum that clearly enunciates meaningful learning outcomes, both language and content, without which differentiation is not possible, (b) conducting a needs analysis to recognize the students interests, readiness, needs and learning performances, based on an ongoing assessment, and finally (c) maximizing the teaching and learning process through the implementation of differentiated instruction in the classroom. Multiple examples and useful tools will be provided to clarify each of the three steps. To achieve the intended outcomes of DI, teachers will be introduced to DI and its advantages. Moreover, they will be trained on how to implement DI in their classrooms efficiently starting from planning activities, providing clear instructions to students, and conducting on-going assessment to monitor students' progress.

The limitations of the study can be due to the limited number of the faculty members who will be interviewed, 7 faculty members of whom 4 female faculty members and 3 male, which will not enable the researcher to generalize the findings, furthermore, the faculty members who will be interviewed will be 7 members from the EAP program, English instructors, hence, the findings may not be the same if the study will be conducted to include other faculty members from other schools at the university.

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6. Appendix (1)

6.1. Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching English?
2. Do you implement Differentiated Instruction in your classrooms? How long have you been using this method?
3. Do you find it easy to use this approach? How?
4. What forced you to use this technique?
5. How do you implement differentiated instruction in undergraduate courses?
6. What barriers do you face? And
7. How can these barriers be overcome?
8. Do you have any experiences with Differentiated Instruction? How did those experiences impact your classrooms performance?
9. What is your overall evaluation of Differentiated Instruction and how do you see it?