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INTRODUCING DIFFERENTIATION METHOD TO BUILD AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM AMONG 7TH GRADERS' ENGLISH LESSONS

Abstract. In today's highly diverse classrooms, effective instruction must recognise and respond to the different readiness levels, interests and learning styles of students. This article examines how a differentiated instruction (DI) method can be introduced in the 7th-grade English curriculum at an IB school in Astana to build a more inclusive classroom. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of differentiation and inclusive pedagogy, literature on DI in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, and a proposed phased implementation model (pre-lesson, lesson delivery, post-lesson/reflection), the article provides a framework for tailoring English lessons to a heterogeneous group of students. The framework addresses differentiation by phase, knowledge of English proficiency, student interest, and learning styles. When teachers proactively design content, process and product options, and monitor student engagement and outcomes, students with varied needs can access the curriculum, feel valued, and participate meaningfully. The article concludes with implications for practice at school contexts and recommendations for further research.

Keywords: differentiation, inclusive classroom, 7th grade, heterogeneous, learning style, interest, readiness.

Introduction

The modern classroom is characterised by learner diversity in multiple dimensions: prior knowledge and language proficiency, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, interests, motivations, and preferred learning styles. In the context of English language education among early adolescents, such as 7th graders, this diversity presents both challenges and opportunities. The school serves a multilingual and multicultural student body in Astana, Kazakhstan, where English is taught as an additional language and learners arrive with varying levels of proficiency, motivation and background. For 7th-grade English classes at school, simply delivering a one-size-fits-all lesson risks excluding some learners—those who are either ahead or behind, those whose interests differ, or who learn best through different modalities.

Inclusive education demands that all students – regardless of their proficiency, interest or preferred way of learning – should have equitable access to meaningful learning opportunities [1]. Differentiated instruction (DI) is widely recognised as a pedagogical approach that enables teachers to respond to learner diversity while maintaining high expectations for all students [2]. By differentiation along the dimensions of content (what students learn), process (how they learn) and product (how they demonstrate learning), DI helps to ensure that each learner can engage, progress and succeed.

In the specific context of 7th-grade English lessons, this article proposes a structured differentiation method organised by instructional phase (pre-lesson, during lesson, post lesson/reflection), by students' English knowledge/proficiency, by interest, and by learning styles. The objective is to build an inclusive classroom in which every student has multiple pathways to access the curriculum, engage with it, and demonstrate their learning. The rest of the article is structured as follows: a review of key literature on DI and inclusive instruction in EFL contexts; presentation of the differentiated framework; discussion of implementation at school's 7th grade; and conclusion with implications and recommendations.

Literature Review

Differentiated Instruction and the Inclusive Classroom

Education today faces the vital task of addressing learners' diverse needs in increasingly heterogeneous classrooms. Differentiated instruction (DI) has emerged as a pedagogical framework

that promotes equity and inclusion by adapting teaching methods, materials, and assessments to suit varying readiness levels, learning preferences, and interests. According to Tomlinson, DI is not a set of strategies but a philosophy of teaching that begins with the recognition of student diversity as an opportunity for responsive instruction. In inclusive classrooms, where learners of differing linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional backgrounds learn together, differentiation plays a critical role in fostering engagement and academic success for all.

This literature review examines key theoretical foundations and research findings related to DI in inclusive education settings. It highlights conceptual understandings of differentiation, explores its relationship with inclusive teaching practices, and synthesizes evidence from recent studies, including those of [3], [1].

Theoretical Background of Differentiated Instruction

Tomlinson's framework defines differentiation as proactive modification of content, process, product, and learning environment in response to learners' differences in readiness, interest, and learning profile [4]. The central assumption is that all students can learn effectively when instruction aligns with their individual learning needs. Differentiation, therefore, is grounded in constructivist and learner-centred theories, in which students construct understanding through meaningful interaction with content [5].

Dale and Wærness further emphasize that differentiation must involve systematic variation in tasks and supports to enable mastery learning [6]. They argue that effective differentiation prevents the marginalization of lower-performing students and promotes self-efficacy through accessible challenges. Similarly, Tomlinson and Imbeau note that differentiation should not mean individualized instruction for every learner but the creation of flexible pathways that allow all students to progress toward shared learning goals [7].

Differentiation and Inclusive Education

While numerous studies describe the structure and strategies of DI, its broader value lies in its capacity to promote inclusive learning environments. Rather than focusing on implementation barriers, current research highlights DI as a proactive framework that supports equity by valuing learner diversity. By tailoring instruction to multiple readiness levels and abilities, teachers create classrooms where all learners—regardless of background or capacity—access the curriculum meaningfully. This conceptual alignment forms the bridge between differentiation and inclusion.

Inclusive education seeks to provide equitable opportunities for all learners, including those with special educational needs, linguistic differences, or varied socioeconomic backgrounds. According to UNESCO [8], inclusion entails removing barriers to participation and ensuring that every learner feels valued and supported. Differentiated instruction provides a pedagogical mechanism for achieving these goals.

Gheysens et al. [3] assert that inclusive differentiation should not be understood as a reactive strategy but as a systematic, school-wide commitment to student diversity. Their study across European classrooms revealed that when DI is embedded in lesson planning, assessment, and collaboration, students with differing abilities engage more confidently and demonstrate stronger academic outcomes. Celik [1] similarly observed that differentiated approaches in language teaching promote inclusivity by allowing students to participate at varying proficiency levels while sharing common communicative objectives.

Tomlinson [2] stresses that inclusive classrooms are characterized by flexibility, respect for individual growth trajectories, and continuous formative assessment. Differentiation operationalizes these principles by ensuring that instruction responds dynamically to learners' evolving needs. As Dale and Wærness [6] argue, the essence of inclusion is not uniformity but accessibility; differentiation serves as the practical means to achieve that accessibility.

The benefits of differentiated instruction are evident in its ability to enhance student engagement and motivation, build a positive classroom rapport, and improve academic achievement. [9] found that differentiated environments improve learners' self-esteem, autonomy, and sense of agency through opportunities for choice and appropriate challenge. Differentiation also fosters positive classroom relationships; when students collaborate in mixed-ability groups, they develop empathy and cooperation

skills [10], [1]. reported that differentiated practices strengthen language outcomes and create more cohesive classroom communities. In inclusive contexts, flexible assessment methods as portfolios and performance tasks, allow teachers to recognise individual progress, ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all [3]. Overall, the literature highlights differentiated instruction as an effective and equitable approach that promotes engagement, autonomy, and access to learning for every student, viewing diversity as a valuable classroom resource.

Phased Implementation and Classroom Practices

Practical models of DI typically focus on three key instructional dimensions: content, process, and product [2]. Teachers may differentiate content by varying texts, resources, or complexity levels to ensure accessibility for all learners. Process differentiation involves adapting learning activities and grouping structures to align with students' learning styles or multiple intelligences [11]. Product differentiation allows learners to demonstrate understanding through diverse outputs, such as written reports, oral presentations, or creative projects.

Effective differentiated instruction is often structured through phases: planning (pre-lesson), implementation (during lesson) and reflection/assessment (post-lesson). In the planning phase, the teacher anticipates student needs, designs varied tasks and materials. During the lesson, the teacher uses flexible grouping, scaffolds tasks, offers choice and monitors student progress. In reflection/assessment, students may choose how to demonstrate learning, and the teacher uses formative feedback and adjusts subsequent instruction accordingly (Gheysens & Van Den Brande). The literature underscores that differentiation is the most successful when it is embedded in the instructional cycle rather than treated as episodic.

Building on the literature reviewed above, this article proposes a differentiated instruction framework designed for 7th-grade English lessons. The framework addresses four major axes: phase (pre-lesson, during-lesson, post-lesson/reflection), student knowledge of English (readiness levels), student interests, and student learning styles. Each axe will guide the teacher's planning, delivery and assessment of instruction.

Materials and Methods

Pre-Lesson Stage

In the pre-lesson planning phase, the teacher should conduct phasing test to identify students' English level (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, writing) and meet their interests and preferred learning styles. According to Kolb's learning style theory, learners may prefer visual, auditory, read/write, or kinesthetic modes of learning [12]. When planning lessons, these preferences are taken into account. For example, when preparing slides, teachers can add pictures alongside new vocabulary or short videos to introduce a topic. Reading and writing tasks can be included in every lesson, while there is space for hands-on activities, such as creating booklets on a given topic, allow students to engage kinesthetically.

Based on this data, the teacher will group students into approximate group (for example: Phase 1 – less progressive, Phase 2 – more progressive) and design content, learning process and summative assessment accordingly:

Content differentiation: For the less progressive students, the teacher may provide scaffolded vocabulary list, simplified texts, visuals, writing templates with ready to use phrases; for the more improved group of students, a teacher can offer an original text with or without pictures; independent task, writing templates without phrases but questions to answer.

Process differentiation refers to the adaptation of teaching and learning activities (the process of learning) to accommodate students' diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles. In other words, it involves varying the ways in which students engage with content and develop understanding. Effective process differentiation allows learners to access the same curriculum through different levels of support and challenge. In practice, this can be achieved through a variety of classroom strategies. For instance, for the teaching process, teachers may prepare different handouts for students according to their proficiency levels, such as simplified texts or vocabulary definitions for less advanced learners.

Product differentiation: Students are given a choice of how to demonstrate their learning: e.g., write a short story, record a podcast, create a poster, or present a dialogue. The tasks differ in

complexity (tiering) but address the same language objectives (e.g., use of Present Simple, Present Continuous, topical vocabulary, persuasive phrases). For example, students study «Travelling and Adventure» and they can show their learning results by choosing a city and creating either a poster or an e-presentation.

Learning environment: The teacher plans for flexible seating, partner/triad groupings, stations differentiated by readiness and style, and establishes expectations and supports for groupings.

During-Lesson Stage

During the lesson, the teacher organizes the class in flexible groupings (homogeneous or heterogeneous depending on task) and monitors student progress. Key practices include:

Differentiation in the classroom can be effectively implemented through a combination of strategies that address students' varying readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Tiered assignments allow different groups to work on tasks of varying difficulty or scaffolding levels, all aligned with the same learning objective. Similarly, choice boards give students autonomy to select from a range of activities that match their interests or learning styles, promoting engagement and ownership of learning.

Teachers can provide scaffolded support by pulling less-progressive students for guided practice while allowing more proficient learners to work on extension tasks or engage in peer teaching. Ongoing formative tasks or assessment play a key role, as teachers continuously monitor progress, ask probing questions, and adjust lesson pacing or task complexity based on students' responses—reflecting the «output = input» principle described by Gheysens and Van Den Brande.

In addition, differentiation can be strengthened through multiple modalities, such as visual (charts, diagrams), auditory (recordings), kinesthetic (role-plays, movement), and collaborative learning tasks that accommodate diverse learning preferences. Activities should also connect to students' interests, especially those relevant to 7th-graders—such as cities, favorite movies, computer games, or social media—to sustain motivation. Throughout these practices, teachers can offer extra guidance and scaffolding for those needing support while granting greater independence to advanced learners. Pair and group work further encourage collaboration and peer learning, allowing students to learn from one another.

Post-Lesson Phase

After the main instructional activities, students engage in reflection and demonstrate their understanding through differentiated product options. To support this process, the teacher integrates several assessment and feedback strategies. Students complete self- or peer-assessments, reflecting on their task choices, evaluating their performance, and setting personal goals for improvement. The teacher conducts formative and summative assessments using rubrics tiered by achievement level but aligned with shared learning objectives to ensure fairness and consistency.

Feedback is personalized according to each student's readiness, interests, and learning preferences—for example, a visually oriented learner who needs support in writing may receive visual scaffolds combined with a peer conference. Finally, the teacher uses insights from student work, engagement levels, and reflections to plan the next lesson, adjusting groupings, scaffolding, and task options as needed. This continuous process sustains the cycle of differentiation, ensuring instruction remains responsive to learners' evolving needs.

Phase-by-phase considerations in the current study context

In the planning phase, the teacher can administer a brief online diagnostic through the school's LMS to determine students' English proficiency levels. To better understand learners' interests, the teacher may also collect interest profiles (for example, via Google Forms) to identify preferred topics such as music, sports, travel, gaming, or social media. Additionally, learning-style inventories can offer useful insights into whether students respond best to visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or reading/writing tasks.

During the lesson, the teacher takes advantage of the school's well-equipped classrooms—including interactive whiteboards and computers—to provide multimodal learning experiences. For example, proficient learners might create a short English «travel vlog», developing learners could perform a collaborative role-play at activity stations, and emerging learners might work with

scaffolded graphic organizers and peer-supported reading. The teacher circulates to observe, record notes on a tablet, and uses short exit slips to gauge understanding.

After the lesson, students upload their completed work to the LMS and respond to short self-reflection prompts (e.g., «What choice did I make? Why? What will I do next time to improve?»). The teacher reviews the submissions using a tiered rubric aligned with common learning goals and provides individual or pair feedback to help students set personalized improvement targets. These reflections and assessments then inform planning for the next lesson, with adjustments such as regrouping students, modifying tasks, or introducing new interest-based activities to maintain a responsive and differentiated learning cycle.

Results and Discussion

Addressing students' readiness within differentiation

Differentiation by readiness means tasks and scaffolding must align with their current level but still aim toward the same objective (e.g., «Use past simple to describe a holiday»). At the school of current study, 7th-grade students may vary from early-intermediate to advanced levels of English. Therefore, for emerging students: simplified text, scaffolded sentence starters, peer-group support; for developing students: standard text with optional extension questions; for advanced students: richer text, optional challenge tasks (e.g., adding modal verbs or reported speech). Importantly, the common goal remains constant, so no students are “left behind” or given a trivial task.

Differentiation by interest

Interest-based differentiation motivates students and supports engagement. At IB school, a teacher might offer activity options tied to topics students care about: e.g., travel, favourite sports teams, digital media, environmental issues. The choice board might include tasks such as writing a travel blog, creating a sports commentary in English, or making an infographic about climate change. By aligning tasks with interest, the teacher taps into intrinsic motivation, which is known to enhance engagement (Widayanti et al.).

Differentiation by Learning Styles

While the concept of «learning styles» is debated, it remains pedagogically useful to vary how content is delivered and how students demonstrate learning. The teacher can structure learning stations and tasks that reflect visual, auditory, kinesthetic, social/solitary preferences. For example: a visual station uses mind-maps/infographics; an auditory station uses audio recordings and peer discussion; a kinesthetic station uses role-play or movement-based tasks; a solitary station uses individual reflection and writing. This variety helps ensure that students with different predispositions can engage meaningfully.

Benefits and Challenges

Research shows that DI supports social inclusion, self-concept and well-being in heterogeneous classrooms. For instance, Pozas et al. found positive association of perceived teacher DI practice with students' school well-being and inclusion. In EFL classes, Purnamaningwulan and Purwanto documented students' positive perceptions of DI in a 7th-grade EFL context: increased motivation, better collaboration and improved learning experience. In the current study context, such benefits may translate into improved student engagement, a stronger sense of belonging in the English classroom, and higher achievement across proficiency levels.

However, implementing differentiated instruction has challenges. Gheysens and Van Den Brande highlight that often DI is implemented only partially that is, only one dimension is differentiated or only occasionally rather than embedded as a pedagogical model. Teachers require time, professional development, and planning support. In an international school, teacher workload, class size, and resource constraints may impede full implementation. Moreover, data collection (on interest, learning style, readiness) and grouping logistics require systems and flexibility.

Monitoring and Continuous Improvement

The teacher this school should maintain a differentiation log or journal: key data include number of students in each readiness band, task choices made (by interest/learning style), student engagement levels (observed and self-reported), outcomes (via formative worksheets, exit tickets, products), and reflection outcomes (student reflections, teacher notes). Over time (say one unit spanning 4-5 weeks) this data can

inform adjustments: e.g., more scaffolding for emerging students, different interest options for low-engagement students, alternative grouping strategies for kinesthetic-preferencing learners.

Moreover, involving students in decision-making builds ownership. For example, at the end of a unit, a class discussion or survey: «Which activity did you choose and why? How did it help you? What other choice would you like next time?» This supports metacognitive development and inclusion. A study on differentiated instruction in writing activities found increased learner autonomy when students were offered choice and reflected on their preferences.

Conclusion

This article has presented a differentiated instruction framework tailored to 7th-grade English lessons at an IB school in Astana. By structuring differentiation across four axes – phase (pre-lesson, during-lesson, post-lesson/reflection), readiness (students' English proficiency/knowledge), interest, and learning styles – teachers can design inclusive, responsive lessons that meet diverse learner needs while maintaining high expectations for all.

The theoretical foundations demonstrate that differentiated instruction supports inclusive education by enabling access, engagement and meaningful progress for every student (Celik, 2016; Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019) and is effective in EFL/EAL settings (Purnamaningwulan & Purwanto, 2025; Hidalgo-Camacho et al., 2019) [14]. The practical framework aligns with these findings.

In the current study context, several enabling conditions exist (international school environment, diverse learner body, resources) but also challenges (time for planning, grouping logistics, gathering accurate interest/style data, differentiated assessment). Addressing these through professional development, planned reflection, data-informed instruction and student involvement fosters sustainable implementation.

Recommendations for Practice

To sustain effective differentiation, schools can implement a structured cycle of professional development, planning, and reflection. Leadership can schedule regular workshops and collaborative planning sessions for English teachers to share differentiated strategies and materials. Each unit should begin with a diagnostic assessment and interest/learning style survey, supported by continuous tracking of students' readiness and task choices. A flexible materials bank—including scaffolded readings, challenge texts, infographics, and video-creation tasks—would allow teachers to quickly tailor lessons to diverse needs. Students should have opportunities for reflection and choice, selecting tasks that match their interests and evaluating their learning process. Ongoing formative assessment through exit slips, observations, and peer/self-assessment enables teachers to adjust scaffolding and groupings dynamically. Finally, regular review and refinement of differentiation logs help identify which strategies and interest-based options are most effective for future planning.

Recommendations for Further Research

Given the relative scarcity of studies conducted in Kazakhstan or Central Asian international schools, future research could investigate how DI implementation at IB school affects student outcomes (proficiency gains, engagement, self-concept) via action-research or quasi-experimental design. Moreover, longitudinal studies could assess how student choice and differentiated tasks influence motivation and language retention over time. Finally, exploring the intersection of digital tools with DI offers promising avenues for resource-rich international schools.

In conclusion, introducing differentiated instruction in the 7th-grade English classroom at the IB School is both feasible and aligned with inclusive education imperatives. With careful design, ongoing reflection and institutional support, DI can transform a mixed-ability, multicultural class into a dynamic, engaging, inclusive learning community where every student has a pathway to success.

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7-СЫНЫП ОҚУШЫЛАРЫНЫҢ АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІ САБАҚТАРЫНДА ИНКЛЮЗИВТІ СЫНЫП ҚАЛЫПТАСТЫРУҒА АРНАЛҒАН САРАЛАП ОҚЫТУ ӘДІСІН ЕНГІЗУ

Андатпа. Бүгінгі таңда әртүрлі сыныптарда тиімді оқыту – оқушылардың дайындық деңгейлерін, қызығушылықтарын және оқу стильдерін ескере отырып жүргізілуі қажет. Бұл мақала Астанадағы ІВ мектебінің 7-сыныптағы ағылшын тілі бағдарламасына сараланған оқыту (СО) әдісін енгізу арқылы инклюзивті оқу ортасын қалыптастыруды қарастырады. Мақала сараланған оқыту мен инклюзивті педагогиканың теориялық негіздеріне, шет тілі ретінде ағылшын тілін (EFL) оқытудағы СО туралы әдебиеттерге және кезеңдік енгізу үлгісіне (сабаққа дейінгі дайындық, сабақ өткізу, сабақтан кейінгі талдау/рефлексия) сүйенеді. Онда әр түрлі деңгейдегі оқушыларға бейімделген ағылшын тілі сабақтарын ұйымдастыруға арналған құрылым ұсынылады. Бұл құрылым саралаудың кезеңдерін, ағылшын тілі меңгеру деңгейін, оқушылардың қызығушылықтарын және оқу стильдерін қамтиды. Мұғалімдер мазмұнды, оқыту процесін және нәтижелік өнімдерді алдын ала жоспарлап, оқушылардың қатысуы мен жетістіктерін үнемі бақылап отырса, әр түрлі қажеттіліктері бар оқушылар оқу бағдарламасына толық қатысып, өздерін бағалайтынын сезініп, белсенді қатыса алады. Мақала мектеп жағдайында сараланған оқытуды енгізудің тәжірибелік маңызын және болашақ зерттеулерге арналған ұсыныстарды қорытындылайды.

Тірек сөздер: саралау, инклюзивті сынып, 7-сынып, әртекті, оқу стилі, қызығушылық, дайындық деңгейі.

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ВНЕДРЕНИЕ МЕТОДА ДИФФЕРЕНЦИАЦИИ ДЛЯ СОЗДАНИЯ ИНКЛЮЗИВНОГО КЛАССА НА УРОКАХ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА В 7-Х КЛАССАХ

Аннотация. Современных классах эффективное обучение должно учитывать и реагировать на различные уровни готовности, интересы и стили обучения учащихся. В данной статье рассматривается, как метод дифференцированного обучения (ДО) может быть внедрён в учебную программу по английскому языку для 7-го класса в IV школе г.Астаны с целью создания более инклюзивной образовательной среды. Опираясь на теоретические основы дифференциации и инклюзивной педагогики, исследования ДО в контексте преподавания английского языка как иностранного (EFL), а также на предложенную поэтапную модель внедрения (подготовительный этап, проведение урока, этап после урока/рефлексия), статья предлагает структуру адаптации уроков английского языка для неоднородной группы учащихся. В данной структуре отражены аспекты дифференциации по этапам, уровню владения английским языком, интересам и стилям обучения учащихся. Когда учителя заранее проектируют варианты содержания, процесса и продукта, а также отслеживают вовлечённость и результаты учеников, учащиеся с различными потребностями получают доступ к учебной программе, чувствуют свою значимость и могут активно участвовать в обучении. В заключении статьи рассматриваются практические выводы для школьного контекста и даны рекомендации для дальнейших исследований.

Ключевые слова: дифференциация, инклюзивный класс, 7-й класс, разнородный, стиль обучения, интерес, готовность.

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