

Review Article

To Recognise, Realise and Differentiate the Learning Needs of Students

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia not only are our classrooms often large but they also have a diverse, heterogeneous groups of students. Teachers nowadays face the greatest challenge in meeting the different learning needs of a diverse group of students. Thus, teachers need to recognise and realise the individual learning mode of all their students and to motivate them so as to maximise the learning progress and the achievements of these students. The learning preferences of learners are based on multiple intelligences. Students come with different abilities, skills and characteristics. Furthermore, students respond positively when learning is meaningful, personalised and relevant; thus, knowing what type of learners they are and the way they prefer to learn would greatly aid teachers in the classroom. Therefore, we need to diversify the curriculum to fit the needs of 21st century learners so as to enhance the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, differentiating in content, differentiating in process, differentiating in product, language styles, learning profile, Multiple Intelligences, SISC+

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Malaysian education system is to develop students' potential and

equip them with 21st-century skills and give them opportunities that would prepare them for the challenges of this century knowing that they will be competing in the future with the best of the world. The Ministry of Education Malaysia remains committed to fulfilling the potential needs of students in the Malaysian education system and to providing better access to quality education for every student.

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In October 2011, the Ministry of Education launched a comprehensive review of the education system in Malaysia in line with the new National Education Blueprint. This decision was made in the context of raising the international education standards, which are the Government's aspiration and policy of preparing Malaysia's children for the needs of the 21st century (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2012, p.E-1).

In line with the Education Blueprint 2012 and to meet the challenges of the 21st century, the curriculum has been designed to fulfil the goals of the education system to develop young Malaysians who are knowledgeable, able to think critically and creatively, and have good communication skills, thus, producing life-long learners.

The efforts of teachers to respond to different learners in the classroom is of vital importance in the context of the education system and policy. In order to create the best learning experience possible, a teacher needs to vary or recreate his or her teaching in order to reach out to the individual student. In our often large classrooms we have a diverse, heterogeneous group of students. Teachers nowadays face the greatest challenge in meeting the different learning needs of these students. In addition, most teachers do not understand their students' potential and abilities. In the English language classroom, teachers

need to recognise that students range from the highly motivated to the disinterested, varying in skills acquisition and in the ways they prefer to learn.

What is Differentiation

Differentiated instruction is a model of teaching that requires teachers to have flexible approaches in their instruction. This means adjusting the curriculum and instruction to fit the needs of the learners, instead of the learners being expected to modify themselves for the curriculum (National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum Effective Classroom Practices Report, as cited in Hall, 2002).

Educators must realise that learners are different in many ways. Students vary in culture, socioeconomic status, language, gender, motivation, ability/disability, personal interests and more, and teachers must be aware of this diversity of factors.

According to Tomlinson, differentiating instruction is to create multiple paths so that students of different abilities, interest or learning needs experience equally appropriate ways to absorb, use, develop and present concepts as a part of their daily learning process. However, she also added that differentiation is required when students cannot learn the way we teach, hence we must teach them the way they learn. Differentiation simply means teaching students differently according to their needs and their preferred learning style. Teachers need to make sure that they use a

variety of teaching approaches capable of accommodating the different abilities and learning preferences of students.

OBJECTIVES

Our classrooms are filled with students who have different needs, come from different educational backgrounds and have different attention spans and interests, language abilities and cultural backgrounds. In other words, our students are multi-levelled. Thus, the general objective of this paper is to help teachers identify the learning styles of learners through multiple intelligences and their learning needs. Learning styles are concerned with differences in the process of learning, whereas multiple intelligences centre on the content and products of learning. Integrating learning styles and multiple intelligences can help learners learn in many ways (Silver, Strong & Perini, 1997). The teacher needs to respond to variance among students based on their learning profiles, readiness and interests. Teachers may not aware of the importance of designing and implementing differentiated lesson plans in enhancing the learning and teaching process of learners in the 21st century.

This paper also shows the different components of differentiation, giving teachers an idea how to plan and design tasks and implement lessons based on students' needs and abilities. It also emphasises awareness among teachers about differentiated plans and tasks. In this

paper, some practical suggestions are given to teachers on how to integrate and apply learning styles and multiple intelligences in the classroom.

AN OVERVIEW OF DIFFERENTIATION

Students are not the same. One size does not fit all. They do not learn or perform in the same way. Knowing what type of learners they are and how they prefer to learn will help teachers to help learners improve how they learn.

The concept of multiple intelligences highlights the many strengths of learners. Differentiation stems from beliefs about differences among learners, how they learn, learning preferences and individual interests (Anderson, 2007). Students respond positively when learning is meaningful, personalised and relevant to their everyday life situation. The elements differentiated below will take into consideration the student's readiness, interest or learning profile. It is vital for teachers to differentiate the four classroom elements as described below to maximise successful learning.

Content – what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information within the necessary time;

Process – different approaches to activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content;

Products – demonstrating their learning product or culminating projects that ask the student to rehearse, apply, and extend what he or she has learnt; and Learning environment – the way the classroom works and feels. (Tomlinson, 2000)

Differentiating in Content

When teachers differentiate content, they may adapt what they want students to learn or how students access knowledge, understanding and skills (Anderson, 2007). A teacher makes adjustments to the learning materials or aligns the tasks or projects to cater for different levels of proficiency among students in a classroom. For example, reading materials could be at various readability levels or ideas can be presented through both auditory and visual means. Meeting with small groups to re-teach an idea or skill for struggling learners could be carried out. Teachers can differentiate the content by preparing vocabulary lists at readiness levels of students or either reduce or simplify the content or the link content to students' interests.

Differentiating in Process

Differentiating by process refers to how a student comes to understand and assimilate facts, concepts and skills (Anderson, 2007). A teacher thinks of effective ways/approaches/activities suitable to an individual or a small group of students to ensure all students get a chance to learn. Some students prefer

to read on a topic, listen to a topic or acquire knowledge by manipulating objects associated with the content. Many teachers use areas of Multiple Intelligences to provide learning opportunities. Some examples of differentiating the process or activities include using tiered activities through which, all learners work with the same important areas of understanding and skills, but proceed with different levels of support or complexity. Interest centres that encourage students to explore further class topic of particular interest to them, can be provided. Process can be differentiated by providing hands-on support for students who need it or by varying the length of time a learner needs to complete a task. Anchor activities can also be provided for advanced students to pursue a topic in greater depth. During this process of differentiation, flexible grouping is allowed, where mixed ability groups, interest groups or ability groups are formed.

Differentiating in Products

When educators differentiate by product or performance, they are affording students various ways of demonstrating what they have learnt from the lesson or unit (Anderson, 2007). Here students with different abilities show or demonstrate what they have learnt. Examples of differentiating products include creating or designing their own assignments, creating a puppet show or a greeting card or role-play. The learners can talk or write journals about what they have learnt. They can also use visual aids, posters

or create songs to demonstrate their learning products. Mind maps or i-think maps can be used to differentiate the learning process. During this process, the learners are allowed to work alone or in small groups on their learning products.

Learning Environment

Differentiating through the environment is important as it creates the conditions for optimal learning to take place. The learning environment includes the physical layout of the classroom, areas for quiet individual work as well as areas for group work. Students are aware of the classroom rules and know routines and procedures when carrying out activities (Tomlinson, 2003).

Teachers should employ classroom management techniques that support a safe and supportive learning environment in which students are allowed to carry out collaborative activities. The classroom should be quiet without any distraction. There should be certain guidelines for independent work. Teachers must be aware that some learners do better sitting quietly while others need to move around to learn (Tomlinson, 1999).

When teachers are busy with some students and cannot help those who need help immediately, certain routines need to be developed, for example “parking lots” can be implemented where students can post their questions on a board or show their “traffic lights” to get help from teachers

or to express their level of understanding. Red posts indicate that learners do not understand, yellow that they are in a state of confusion and green that they understand the teaching process.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key principles of differentiation should be adhered to in a differentiated classroom (Tomlinson, 2001b). The tasks should be of equal interest and relevant for all students. Opportunities given to learners must be challenging and extended to all students to cater for varied interests and learning styles. Differentiation allows for flexible grouping with a variety of peers. In order to develop the students’ individual capacity and potential, activities for differentiation require meaningful, powerful and engaging work.

Differentiation provides several learning options, or different paths to learning, which help students take in information and make sense of concepts and skills. Through differentiation, appropriate levels of challenge are provided for all students, including those who lag behind, those who are advanced and those right in the middle. Teachers do not develop a separate lesson plan for each level of students in a classroom or “water down” the curriculum for some students. The significance of differentiated teaching techniques is to maximise each student’s growth and success and assist in the learning process.

My Reflections on Differentiated Instruction as an SISC+

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 created a new position in the Ministry of Education Malaysia which is the School Improvement Specialist Coach Plus (SISC+). The role and responsibilities of an SISC+ are prescribed in the District Transformation Programme Guide Book and includes observing only, co-teaching with teachers in class and providing feedback to them on the ways to improve the teaching and learning process. I am an SISC+ and my role is as coach and mentor for 24 schools in the Petaling District Education Office in Selangor. My new role as an SISC+ officer allows me to visit different schools and enhance the teaching and learning of English. In my observations, I have noticed that some students, especially low-proficiency learners are not interested and not motivated to learn English. My assumptions were that they did not understand the content and were not given the opportunity to develop their potential according to their learning styles.

With a typical traditional teaching and learning approach what do you think can happen if all students are given the same task/project with the same expectations for a fixed period of time (say over three weeks)? Low achievers would take a longer period to finish their tasks whereas middle-level achievers would take two weeks to complete their tasks and high achievers would take only one week to complete the same task. This scenario was evident in some of the schools. I then suggested to the

teachers to plan their lessons and vary their approach and activities to meet the needs of all students so that all the students would be able to achieve their tasks based on their learning styles (Multiple Intelligences) and ability levels.

The concept of Differentiated Instruction in the Malaysian Context

This concept of differentiation has not been emphasised until recently in line with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 to introduce 21st century teaching and learning. Even though, it is not a new concept it has not been widely implemented in Malaysian classrooms because teachers do not have knowledge of differentiation. Furthermore, this concept is not favourably practised by teachers in Malaysian classrooms due to the fact the teachers need to make a lot of preparations to cater for a heterogeneous group of students. This is also enhanced by the fact that teachers do not really understand the concept of differentiation due to lack of exposure towards differentiated instruction. Hopefully, there will be changes in the mindset and attitudes of educators to facilitate integration of this concept in their teaching practices to create an effective teaching and learning environment.

CONCLUSION

Differentiated learning is student-centred learning. Consequently, it necessarily follows that although essential curriculum goals may be similar for all students, methodologies employed in a classroom

must be varied to suit the individual needs of all children; learning must be differentiated to be effective. According to Tomlinson, “The model of differentiation is very multifaceted, but it can be boiled down to three students’ needs which call for differentiating instruction: student readiness, student interest, and student learning profile” (2000).

Low-proficiency as well as high-proficiency students are given the opportunity to take increasing responsibility for their own growth. Teaching students to share responsibility allows a teacher to work with different groups or individuals for parts of the class time and prepares students for life-long education. Differentiation is fluid. Differentiation ensures every student has the opportunity to learn to their fullest. Students may learn the essential skills and content which remain steady through various approaches, thus taking different roads to the same destination (Tomlinson, 1999).

I hope this article will be able to transform Malaysian teachers’ attitude and teaching practices in the classroom, particularly when dealing with large heterogenous groups of students. There will be effective learning and maximum progress in learning if teachers recognise and realise the individual needs of all learners and their preferred modes of learning. Teachers need to participate in ongoing collaboration with students. Furthermore, students respond positively when learning is meaningful, personalised and relevant. They are motivated to learn new things when they are connected to their

varied interests and when the instruction is developmentally appropriate. Educators need to differentiate because students as learners are different and one size does not fit all, just like our clothes and shoes.

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The teacher realised that learners have different needs, interests and abilities. Differentiated instruction was invented. The teacher prepared different tasks for each group in her class and preparation now took a whole lot longer. The needs of the learner were being better catered for, but the teacher was up all night. She needed to think about differentiation in a different way. 10 ways to differentiate learning

1. Let go. Give the students (at least some) ownership of their learning. Don't always be the boss of the class, be part of the community of learners. Don't make all the decisions.