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FROM "SINGLE-SIZE INSTRUCTION" TO DIFFERENTIATED PERSONALISED LEARNING IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSROOMS

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Abstract
Learners of the same age often exhibit significant differences in readiness, interests, motivation, and preferred learning methods. When teachers assume homogeneity, many students experience unnecessary frustration or boredom. This article rearticulates the rationale for transitioning from "single-size instruction" to differentiated personalized learning in mixed-ability classrooms and describes how this shift is implemented in practice. Building on the tradition of differentiated instruction, the paper addresses common misconceptions—such as the belief that differentiation requires a separate plan for each student, leads to disorder, or necessitates permanent ability grouping—before outlining core design principles: proactive planning, qualitative task adaptation, continuous formative assessment, flexible grouping, and diverse product options that maintain shared goals. Practical implications are illustrated with examples from English language teaching (ELT), including tiered speaking and writing assignments and the use of a common rubric for diverse outputs.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, personalised learning, mixed-ability classrooms, formative assessment, flexible grouping, ELT

Introduction

Students of the same age frequently learn in different ways. Despite similar developmental stages and shared classroom experiences, students differ in prior knowledge, confidence, learning pace, language backgrounds, and perceptions of meaningful content. Differentiated instruction is grounded in the recognition that classrooms can pursue common goals while considering student differences as essential factors in instructional design. This approach restructures learning by providing multiple avenues for students to access content, comprehend ideas, and demonstrate knowledge, rather than restricting them to a single method (Tomlinson, 2001).

This consideration is particularly important in mixed-ability classes, as an "average" task rarely meets the needs of all students. When tasks do not align with a student's readiness, students may lose interest, engage in rote copying, or interpret their struggles as personal failure. Conversely, if tasks are too easy for advanced learners, the classroom may appear orderly, but genuine academic growth is limited (Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiated instruction is therefore regarded as a practical approach to personalizing learning in authentic classroom settings. Effective implementation requires careful planning and ongoing assessment. Teachers must identify individual students' strengths and needs and create flexible learning environments where tasks, groupings, and resources can be adjusted as necessary. Successful differentiation typically involves providing a variety of activities, assignments, and assessment methods to ensure that all students have meaningful opportunities to learn and succeed (Heacox, 2017). Collaboration among teachers, administrators, and families further enhances the effectiveness of differentiated strategies, fostering a more inclusive and responsive classroom culture. Despite its advantages, differentiated instruction presents challenges, including increased planning time, the need for continuous assessment, and the management of diverse learning activities simultaneously (Subban, 2006). Addressing these challenges requires professional development and peer collaboration, enabling educators to share effective strategies and resources. Additionally, integrating technology can facilitate differentiation by enabling personalized learning paths and providing timely feedback (Pane et al., 2015). As schools increasingly embrace diversity, a commitment to differentiation is essential for promoting equity and maximizing each learner's potential.

From One-Size to Differentiation: Why It Underperforms

Single-size instruction often persists not due to teacher indifference, but because it appears efficient, predictable, and easier to manage within rigid curricula, high-stakes assessment environments, and time constraints. (David, 2011) However, the educational costs are significant, particularly when identical tasks, pacing, and support structures are applied to learners with widely varying readiness levels, language resources, and learning needs. When instruction consistently fails to align with a learner's optimal zone of challenge, students may interpret struggle as inability or view success as irrelevant. Over time, this mismatch diminishes engagement, academic confidence, and persistence. (Salazar & Gumanoy, 2025)

Psychological research indicates that students are more likely to sustain effort when learning environments foster competence, autonomy, and belonging. When tasks are consistently too demanding, students may experience anxiety, avoidance, and a belief in their own lack of ability. Conversely, when tasks are consistently too easy, boredom and disengagement often result, as learners do not perceive the work as meaningful or sufficiently challenging. Motivation and classroom affect research demonstrates that these emotional outcomes are central, influencing attention, participation, and willingness to take academic risks (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sánchez-Rosas & Pérez, 2016). Formative assessment research further suggests that underperformance is often perpetuated by delayed instructional adjustments; when evidence of misunderstanding or insufficient challenge is not used to promptly modify teaching, students accumulate frustration or apathy, both of which hinder learning gains (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

A differentiated personalised approach addresses these challenges by recognising predictable patterns of learner variation while maintaining coherence in whole-class instruction. (Differentiated Instruction in Teaching ESL Education, 2024) However, this approach is often

misunderstood, resulting in implementation difficulties. Differentiation does not necessitate a separate lesson plan for each student. Instead, it involves designing a limited number of intentional pathways—such as varied scaffolds, alternative entry points, options for demonstrating understanding, or graduated levels of cognitive demand—that address common learner needs without fragmenting the classroom. This approach aligns with Universal Design for Learning, which emphasizes reducing barriers through multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, thereby enabling more students to achieve the same essential goals (CAST, 2018).

Differentiation does not imply disorder. Active classrooms may incorporate structured movement, parallel tasks, and small-group interactions, but effectiveness relies on clear routines, explicit expectations, and strong teacher monitoring. In many instances, differentiation increases the need for precise instructions and well-established classroom norms, as the teacher orchestrates purposeful variation rather than permitting unstructured activity.

A further misconception is that differentiation equates to permanent ability grouping. In reality, effective differentiated teaching relies on flexible grouping that changes according to the task, learning goal, and evidence obtained through ongoing assessment. Students may require intensive support in one domain and enrichment in another, and grouping should reflect this fluidity rather than fixed labels (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Differentiation is not merely "tailoring the same suit" by making minor adjustments, such as assigning additional work to advanced learners or slightly modifying grades. Quantitative changes rarely address mismatches if the core task remains inaccessible for some students or unchallenging for others. (Tomlinson, 2017) Differentiation becomes meaningful when it transforms the learning experience itself—through scaffolding, pacing supports, varied modalities, adjusted reasoning demands, or alternative pathways to the same learning target—so that students perceive challenge as attainable and success as evidence of growth rather than judgment (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Sustainable movement beyond single-size instruction requires that differentiation be grounded in relational practices. When teachers actively listen to students and build trust, learners are more likely to participate, collaborate, and take productive risks. (Partnership in the Classroom: Engaging Students Through Inclusive Student-Teacher Relationships to Advance Social Justice, 2025) Research on teacher–student relationships demonstrates that supportive relational climates contribute to both engagement and students' emotional well-being and resilience, reinforcing learning as a human process rather than a narrow performance metric (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; APA, 2019). In this context, differentiated personalized learning functions as both an instructional framework and a moral commitment, affirming that every learner deserves to be recognized, supported, and challenged in ways that protect dignity and expand potential.

Differentiated personalised learning encompasses a set of practical design principles that render personalisation both realistic and instructionally coherent in mixed-ability classrooms. (Castro, 2022) Instead of planning a single lesson and making adjustments only after some learners encounter difficulties, teachers anticipate learner variation in advance and prepare flexible options to minimize predictable mismatches (Tomlinson, 2001). Effective differentiation is not primarily about assigning more work to some students and less to others; rather, it involves qualitative adjustments such as modifying cognitive demand, linguistic complexity, structure, pacing, and scaffolding to better align tasks with learners' needs (Tomlinson, 2001). Achieving an appropriate "fit" requires a thorough understanding of learners, making differentiation dependent on formative assessment. Teachers gather evidence through observations, classroom dialogue, student work, and brief assessments, then adapt grouping, support, and learning pathways throughout the unit (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b; Tomlinson, 2001). In practice, differentiation provides multiple routes through content, process, and product—varying materials, learning activities, supports, and output formats—while maintaining stable expectations for meaningful growth among all learners (Tomlinson, 2001; Reading Rockets, n.d.). It also fosters learner agency by gradually teaching students to make informed choices, monitor progress, and utilize feedback, consistent with

research on autonomy-supportive learning environments and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). (Self-regulated learning, self-determination theory and teacher candidates' development of competency-based teaching practices, 2021) Typically, differentiated personalized learning combines whole-class instruction with flexible small-group and individual work in a deliberate sequence, enabling both shared understanding and tailored support within the same lesson (Tomlinson, 2001).

Practical Implementation in ELT: Examples of Differentiated Personalisation

While differentiation is applicable across disciplines, English language teaching (ELT) offers particularly clear opportunities, as language learning necessitates accessible input, meaningful interaction, and opportunities for language production.

1. Tiered tasks for one communicative goal

Shared goal: Express an opinion and support it with reasons.

- Tier 1 (high support): sentence starters + key phrase bank + guided dialogue
- Tier 2 (moderate support): role cards + prompts requiring examples
- Tier 3 (high challenge): structured debate with counterargument and rebuttal

All learners pursue the same communicative goal, but the scaffolding and cognitive demands vary. This approach aligns with Tomlinson's emphasis on achieving an appropriate "fit" rather than enforcing uniformity (Tomlinson, 2001).

2. Flexible grouping as "social personalization"

Grouping can be adjusted based on evidence, such as forming readiness groups for a brief pronunciation clinic, mixed-ability groups for information-gap activities, or interest-based groups for projects (Tomlinson, 2001). Importantly, grouping remains temporary, adaptable, and aligned with the learning objective rather than fixed labels.

3. Different products, one shared rubric

Learners may demonstrate the same learning outcome through a blog post, a short podcast, a poster accompanied by an oral explanation, or a brief speech. A single rubric—addressing clarity, coherence, vocabulary range, accuracy, and interaction moves—enables output variation without compromising fairness or standards (Tomlinson, 2001). This practice also aligns with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principle of providing multiple means of action and expression (CAST, 2018).

Discussion: Conditions for Success

Differentiated personalized learning is most sustainable when implemented as a limited set of repeatable classroom routines, rather than an extensive array of choices. (Bondie & Zusho, 2018) In practice, teachers are often most successful when they:

1. establish explicit norms for movement and talk,
2. use short formative checks that directly inform regrouping and scaffolds, and
3. keep learning goals stable while varying the route to those goals (Tomlinson, 2001; Black & Wiliam, 1998a).

The essential point is that differentiation does not equate to "doing less teaching." Rather, it involves teaching with greater intentionality by designing tasks that meet learners at their current level while continuing to promote growth.

Conclusion

Mixed-ability classrooms provide compelling justification for moving beyond "one-size-fits-all instruction." Differentiated instruction offers a practical approach to personalised learning by proactively planning multiple pathways to shared goals, grounding instructional decisions in formative assessment, and employing flexible group structures. When teachers differentiate content, process, and product while maintaining common expectations, they create conditions that enable more learners to participate meaningfully and make consistent progress (Tomlinson, 2001; Black & Wiliam, 1998a).

Ultimately, the transition from single-size instruction to differentiated personalized learning is not simply a methodological shift, but a reaffirmation of the teacher's role as a responsive, compassionate guide. When educators honor the individuality of every learner—adapting content, process, and assessment to meet diverse needs—they help build classrooms that are both more equitable and more motivating. While challenges remain, research and classroom experience demonstrate that thoughtful differentiation fosters academic growth, engagement, and a sense of belonging in mixed-ability settings (Tomlinson, 2017; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). As schools continue to embrace diversity, a commitment to differentiated personalized learning will be essential for preparing all students to thrive in a complex and changing world.

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