MEETING STUDENTS' DIVERSE NEEDS FOR READING THROUGH DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION STRATEGIES

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Abstract: The focus of this research is on meeting South East European University (SEEU) students' diverse needs for reading. Although in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, all four language skills are important, reading becomes most important when students enter university without enough strategies for reading. Therefore the reading material presented should be differentiated to suit everyone's needs. According to Biancarosa & Snow (2006) "a full 70 percent of U. S. middle and high school students require differentiated instruction (DI), which is instruction targeted to their individual strengths and weaknesses" (p.8). Consequently, since it is difficult for native learners to read in their mother tongue then it can be imagined how difficult it might be for EFL learners to read in English. Thus, differentiation in reading classrooms becomes an important responsibility for EFL lecturers.The methods of data collection used in this research wereteacher questionnaires and classroom observations to help discover the level of knowledge and application of DI reading strategies among SEEU EFL lecturers to meet diverse learners' needs. The results of the study conducted showed that there is a discrepancy between the researcher's observations and lecturers' responses regarding the application of DI strategies and also there is some inconsistency between some lecturers' own responses that claim to have applied DI strategies but fail to provide examples of such tasks. Hopefully, this research will help raise teachers' awareness that DI reading strategies should be implemented in their EFL classes generally as well as in their reading classes to enhance diverse students' reading skills and help them with their academic development.

Key words: diverse needs, differentiation in reading classrooms, EFL learners, differentiated instruction strategies, EFL lecturers

1 INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language encompasses the inclusion of all four language skills, which are crucial for becoming a proficient speaker of a particular language. In EFL classes, the importance is also on covering all language skills because they all form a mosaic of helping learners master the language more competently. Although paper acknowledges the significance of including all four language skills in a lesson, meeting students' diverse needs for reading is the main aim of this research, especially focusing on applying differentiated instruction strategies to meet this aim.Moreover, the reason this paper focuses on differentiating reading instructions is related to Ankrum & Bean's (2007) statement that "the process of reading is so complex that instruction tailored to individual needs is difficult for practitioners to attain"(p.136), therefore, lecturers are inclined to avoid it.

As an EFL lecturer who has done research on the topic of differentiation and as a member of the central observation team for many years at SEEU, the researcher was intrigued to discover more about the knowledge and application of DI strategies among EFL lecturers at SEEU. Previously conducted observationswere an impetus for the researcher to undergo a more thorough study on DI strategies by observing an absence of application of DI strategies in the observed classes.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focuses on providing both the information based on literature study on DI in general and on reading classes in particular. There are many definitions provided about differentiation but the one which is more related to this study is Tomlinson's (2010) definition which states that "a teacher proactively plans varied approaches to what students need to learn, how they will learn it and/or how they can express what they have learned" (p. 155). This tells us that lecturers need to think about differentiation since they are planning their lessons in order to be prepared for reaching every student in their classroom and meeting their needs. Another reason for applying differentiation is stated in the following statement that "students do not come to school with the same background experiences, knowledge, and abilities; these differences greatly impact the content the teachers can provide and the instructional strategies they can use" (Levy, 2008 cited in Ross & Johnson, 2012, p. 4).

In terms of applying differentiation in reading classes, Ford (2005),states that "anyone who thinks there is one right way to teach reading has never worked with two children (p.1). As a consequence, lecturers should widen their spectrum of thinking and always have in mind student diversity rather than perceivingstudentsas a group because if the tasks are not appropriate to students' level they will not achieve success. In relation to this, Tomlinson (2001) relies on the writings of Howard (1994) and Vygotsky (1962) in explaining the rationale for applying DI:

We know that learning happens best when a learning experience pushes the learner a bit beyond his or her independence level. When a student continues to work on understandings and skills already mastered, little if any new learning takes place. On the other hand, if tasks are far ahead of a student's current point of mastery, frustration results and learning does not (Tomlinson, 2001, p.8).

Moreover, whether differentiation happens in other classes or in reading classes, the tasks should be adapted to match students' level. Helping students with their reading skills is very crucial, especially for struggling EFL learners who find it even more difficult to read in a foreign language. Consequently, Richardson, J. S., Morgan, R. F. & Fleener, C. (2012) claim that

Good readers read because it gives them pleasure and they do it well; consequently, they get practice in reading and become better at it. However, the research on Striving Readers (Ayers & Miller, 2009 cited in Richardson, J. S., Morgan, R. F. & Fleener, C. , 2012) provides evidence that many poor readers get so discouraged that they lose the will or desire to read and thus to succeed (p.10).

As a result, in order to encourage poor readers to read more and not get frustrated, the lecturers should "provide support for struggling readers by asking reading specialists for help and providing strategic instruction that engages all learners—even struggling readers—in rewarding learning experiences" (Richardson, J. S., Morgan, R. F. & Fleener, C., 2012, p.10).

3 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

3.1 Participants

The participants, who took part in this research conducted in the summer semester 2015, were 16 EFL Lecturers from SEEU, Tetovo/Skopje, Macedonia. The participants were mainly involved in responding to the teacher questionnaires. However, regarding the observations conducted, the number of participants is not specified because the research relies generally on the data gathered from the classroom observations conducted throughout the years in SEEU EFL classes as part of regular classroom observations. The researcher, being a member of the Central Observation Team at SEEU for many years, had collected data for many peer observed classroom observations already, another observation was not necessary for this particular research.

3.2Instruments

Teacher questionnaire (see Appendix 1), which consisted of 8 questions related to teachers' knowledge about DI in reading classes, were the main instrument of this research which helped gather the data about teachers' knowledge and application of DI strategies in their EFL classes, especially in their reading classes. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher, after consulting the literature on DI generally and in reading classes in particular, and after consultations with experienced lecturers as well as based on the needs of the present research.Six questions, were perceived as crucial in providing the necessary data.The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open questions, which required teachers to choose one of the given options, provide their comments as well as match the given choices.

Moreover, classroom observations, conducted regularly at SEEUas part of the Central Observation Team at SEEU (explained above), were another important part of this research because the data was an essential asset which added reliability and validity to the research. The results from classroom observations functioned as anendorsement to the findings obtained from this study because they were used to compare the teacher responses with the researcher's data from classroom observations, therefore what the teachers said about their use and application of DI strategies could be easily compared with the reality observed in the classroom, where two observers were available (an observer and a co-observer).

4 DATA ANALYSIS

In order to analyze the data gathered for conducting this research, it was required that both qualitative and quantitative data analysis is used. Quantitative analysis included the answers requiring rating and matching, whereas qualitative analysis required teachers to provide definitions and comments for certain questions. Consequently, teachers were asked to respond to the questionnaire, which consisted of closed questions e.g. *Yes a lot*; *Yes, a little*; *Not at all*, which were followed by questions requiring teachers to present their own examples of their experience with DI in EFL classrooms. In addition, one of the questions asked teachers to match three scenarios with the type of a lesson, which provided information to check lecturers' knowledge about differentiation if it was incidental or academic.

Regarding the observations, the focus was on the application of DI strategies and tasks in the observed EFL classes throughout the years.

5 RESULTS

The findings of this study focus mainly on the responses gathered from the teacher questionnaires, which are explained in details below, whereas the results from the classroom observations are summarized.

5.1 Questionnaire Responses

5.1.1 Question 1: Are you aware of the term differentiation?Yes, a lot __   Yes, a little__ Not at all__

Regarding the first question which asked participants about their awareness of differentiation, there were mixed responses as follows. Two of the participants said *Yes, a lot*; six participants said *Yes, a little* and eight participants responded with *Not at all*.

5.1.2 Question 2: In what ways do you know about differentiation? Workshop__ Conference__   The Internet__   Formal education__   Other (specify)_____

Those who either answered a lot or a little in question 1 appeared to know about differentiation from conferences, workshops and the Internet. However, only one respondent knew about differentiation from formal education.

5.1.3 Question 3: If you answered question 1 with yes, then answer this question.Could you give a brief definition of differentiation?

Definitions of DI given by teachers:

1. *The efforts of the teacher to respond to variances of learners' needs in the classroom.* **2.** *Using a various range of pre and post reading techniques according to students' proficiency level.* **3.** *Instruction that is tailored to meet specific students' needs.* **4.** *Adjusting your teaching to meet the students' needs.* **5.** *Using a wide variety of teaching strategies for different students.* **6.** *Using different activities, adapting to students' needs and proficiency level.*

5.1.4 Question 4: Do you attempt to differentiate in your class?   Yes, a lot __   Yes, a little__   Not at all__

In relation to the application of DI in their EFL classes, lecturers responded as follows. Two of them stated *Yes, a lot*, five lecturers said *Yes, a little* and nine participants responded with *Not at all* regarding DI applied in their classes.

5.1.5. Question 5: If you answered question 4 with yes, then answer this question.If you attempt to differentiate, what tasks would you give in different ways?

Concerning DI tasks provided in EFL classes, the lecturers responded in the following manner:

1._Tasks with more open outcomes are given, so each student can do the task at the level of ability and knowledge they have._**2.**_Activities in the introductory stage when presenting new grammar or vocabulary item by exemplifying in more than one way and in the production stage not expecting or insisting on the same outcome from students._

5.1.6 Question 6: Do you attempt to differentiate in your reading classes? Yes, a lot __ Yes, a little__ Not at all__

In regards to the lecturers' application of DI in their reading classes specifically, the results are much different than previous ones. As a result, there were two responses stating _Yes, a lot_, two responses stating _Yes, a little_ and twelve responses stating _Not at all_.

5.1.7 Question 7: If you answered question 6 with yes, then answer this question. If you attempt to differentiate, what reading tasks would you give in different ways?

In relation to the DI tasks provided in reading classes the lecturers suggested the following tasks:

1. _Adapting reading comprehension questions to students level of proficiency._   **2**. _Different reading comprehension questions._ **3.** _Reading for gist and detail to less proficient readers. Reading for gist, detail, inference, summarizing to more proficient learners._

5.1.8 Question 8:Below are provided 3 scenes of a reading class. Match the scenarios I-III with the type of a lesson a-c.

   a. No differentiation   b. Little differentiation   c. A lot of differentiation

I.   **The teacher has a passage about reading and uses a PowerPoint including images, illustrations and lecture notes to explain the main points to students. Students read the passage and then they are given one set of closed questions related to the text. _____**

II.   **The teacher has a passage about reading and uses a PowerPoint including images, illustrations and lecture notes to explain the main points to students. Students read the passage and then they are given three activities that fit each student's reading ability; students participate. _____**

III.   **The teacher has a passage about reading. Students read the passage and then they are given one set of closed questions related to the text. _____**

The last question required the teachers to match the scenarios with the type of a lesson. Regardless of the teachers' knowledge and application of DI in their classes all the teachers were able to answer this question. As a result, there were thirteen correct answers, whereas there were only three incorrect answers.

5.2 Observation Findings

From many classroom observations conducted across SEEU and especially in the EFL classes in the past semesters, it was observed that DI strategies were not applied proactively neither generally in EFL classes nor specifically in reading classes in the observed classrooms.

Even though, there were some instances where teachers have tried to retreat from the main course book and use additional resources either printed or electronic, still it was not done with an aim to meet the needs of diverse students in their classroom, but it was done to provide more practice for students. The researcher can certainly claim this because not in any circumstanceneitherwhen the lecturers submitted their lesson plans nor discussed with the observers either before or after the observation have mentioned any intention of applying differentiated instruction strategies in their classes.

6 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The questionnaire results indicate that the answers provided in the questionnaire did not completely match researcher's observationsand even some lecturers contradicted themselves with their responses.

Firstly, lecturers' claimed to have knowledge of DI, and although most teachers who attended workshops and conferences knew a little about differentiation,not all of them could define it correctly. Then, although some teachers claimed to have applied DI in their classes, they failed to provide explanation of the DI tasks they give students, which is questionable because if they have applied it then they should be able to provide an explanation of the tasks they used. Also,some teachers tried to provide some tasks by claiming that they were differentiation tasks but the examples provided did not have any similarity to differentiated tasks.As a result, those tasks were not even shown in this research under lecturer's responses in the results chapter.

Regarding the application of DI in reading classes, even fewer teachers responded to have applied DI strategies and there were only few tasks provided. Finally, regardless of various responses provided throughout the questionnaire, out of sixteen surveyed participants, thirteen matched the tasks and scenarios correctly, whereas only three respondents matched them incorrectly. This shows that lecturers' knowledge about DI is more incidental than academic.

The last question was not only useful for the researcher to collect the required data, but it also helped the participants who knew a little or not at all about differentiation become acquainted with some DI tasks that might be applied in their classes. This question was left as the last one in the teacher questionnaire in order not to let participants see examples of DI tasks while completing the questionnaire. There was even a comment made by one of the respondents that if that question was put earlier then that respondent could have answered all previous questions, which he apparently failed to answer.

The findings from the classroom observation were really helpful in comparing the questionnaire findings with the results from the observed classrooms. Despite the fact that the lecturers claimed that they have applied differentiation in their classes, the data from classroom observations (which included both this observer plus a co-observer) show the opposite. Although, in some of the observed classes there were attempts made to put students in groups, then adapt some tasks from the main course book, or additional resources were used like the internet and other visual data, these tasks were mostly used to enhance the lesson, not differentiate learning. No lesson plan received or in any pre or post observation meetings held with lecturers, demonstrated that while preparing for the lesson or while teaching they tried to differentiate their instruction. As a result, it was concluded that those tasks were not designed to meet each individual students' diverse needs, but they matched teaching to the middle or one size fit all approach which is not what differentiated instruction, defined as "teaching with student variance in mind" (Hall, 2009, p.1) promotes.

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research provides very useful data that helps not only the researcher to discover the level of knowledge and application of DI strategies among SEEU EFL lecturers, but also it should be useful for lecturers themselves because they can hopefully understand the importance of application of DI in their EFL classes generally and in their reading classes too so they can understand how the lack of its application might hinder students from gaining success. The observations reveal that teachers generally care about their students and try to help them by providing additional exercises and tools, but they are not doing it in the appropriate way. Therefore, instead of planning the lesson for students as a group having the same needs, they should step back from those margins and think about their students as individuals and then plan and teach the lesson by applying differentiated instruction strategies.

In conclusion, lecturers should get more information about DI and start applying it in their EFL classes as well as in their reading classes if they want their students to genuinely succeed.

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APPENDIX 1

Teacher Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions related to differentiation in reading classes. Your contribution is appreciated.

1. Are you aware of the term differentiation?   Yes, a lot __   Yes, a little__   Not at all__
2. In what ways do you know about differentiation?
   Workshop__   Conference__   The Internet__   Formal education__   Other (specify)_____
3. If you answered question 1 with yes, then answer this question.
   Could you give a brief definition of differentiation?
   _____
   _____
   _____
4. Do you attempt to differentiate in your class?   Yes, a lot __   Yes, a little__   Not at all__

5. If you answered question 4 with yes, then answer this question.
   If you attempt to differentiate, what tasks would you give in different ways?
   _____
   _____
   _____

6. Do you attempt to differentiate in your reading classes?   Yes, a lot __   Yes, a little__   Not at all__

7. If you answered question 6 with yes, then answer this question.
   If you attempt to differentiate, what reading tasks would you give in different ways?
   _____
   _____
   _____

8. Below are provided 3 scenes of a reading class. Match the scenarios I-III with the type of a lesson a-c.
   b. No differentiation   b. Little differentiation   c. A lot of differentiation

IV.   The teacher has a passage about reading and uses a PowerPoint including images, illustrations and lecture notes to explain the main points to students. Students read the passage and then they are given one set of closed questions related to the text. _____

V. The teacher has a passage about reading and uses a PowerPoint including images, illustrations and lecture notes to explain the main points to students. Students read the passage and then they are given 3 activities that fit each student's reading ability; students participate. _____

VI. The teacher has a passage about reading. Students read the passage and then they are given one set of closed questions related to the text. _____