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EXPANDING DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract

Classrooms are becoming diverse at present, students differ significantly in terms of ability, motivation to learn English, needs, interests, background, learning styles. Educational authorities are in search of providing students with appropriate teaching and learning strategies that cater for a variety of learning profiles. Differentiation considers redeveloping the structure, management and content of the classroom and gives students the best possible chance of learning. The analysis of the data in this area is the aim of our research. This article therefore seeks to synthesize the research supporting a shift to this new approach in modern education leading to the increase in its effectiveness.

Key words: differentiation, differentiated approach, system-activity approach, engagement, mixed-ability classes, gifted students.

АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІН ОҚИТУДАҒЫ САРАЛАУ СТРАТЕГИЯЛАРЫН КЕҢЕЙТУ

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Аннотация

Қазіргі уақытта білім алушылардың сыныптары әртараптандырылуда, оқушылар ағылшын тілін үйрену қабілеті, мотивациясы, қажеттіліктері, қызығушылықтары, білімі, оқу стилі бойынша айтарлықтай ерекшеленеді. Білім беруді басқару студенттерге әртүрлі оқыту профильдерін ескеретін тиісті оқыту және оқыту стратегияларын ұсынуға тырысады. Дифференциация сабақтың құрылымын, басқаруын және мазмұнын қайта құруды қамтиды және оқушыларға ең жақсы мүмкіндіктер береді оқыту. Осы саладағы деректерді талдау біздің зерттеуіміздің мақсаты болып табылады. Осылайша, бұл мақалада қазіргі білім беруде оның тиімділігін арттыруға әкелетін осы жаңа тәсілге көшуді қолдайтын зерттеулерді қорытындылауға әрекет жасалды.

Түйін сөздер: саралау, сараланған тәсіл, жүйелік-белсенділік тәсілі, қатысу, аралас қабілеттері бар сыныптар, дарынды оқушылар.

РАСШИРЕНИЕ СТРАТЕГИЙ ДИФФЕРЕНЦИАЦИИ В ПРЕПОДАВАНИИ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

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Аннотация

В настоящее время классы обучающихся становятся все более разнообразными, учащиеся значительно различаются по способностям, мотивации к изучению английского языка, потребностям, интересам, образованию, стилям обучения. Органы управления образованием стремятся предоставить учащимся соответствующие стратегии преподавания и обучения, которые учитывают различные профили

обучения. Дифференциация предполагает перестройку структуры, управления и содержания занятий и дает учащимся наилучшие возможности обучения. Анализ данных в этой области является целью нашего исследования. Таким образом, в данной статье предпринята попытка обобщить исследования, подтверждающие переход к этому новому подходу в современном образовании, ведущему к повышению его эффективности.

Ключевые слова: дифференциация, дифференцированный подход, системно-деятельностный подход, вовлеченность, классы со смешанными способностями, одаренные учащиеся.

Introduction

The approach which presupposes differentiation is included in the focus of renovations in the sphere of education nowadays. Modern classes comprise students with a variety of individual traits, different background, abilities and interests, work habits, learning styles and desire to study. All these factors taken together require individualization of learning process which stipulates the development of assignments flexible enough and applicable in a certain learning context. The founders of the concept “differentiated approach in education” were the scholars C. Rogers, A. Maslow and R. May. Nowadays this particular concept acquires different interpretations. First of all, it is regarded as the process where personal characteristics are of primary importance. D. Kingore states that differentiated teaching is completely student-centred and therefore students are provided with exceptionally favourable conditions for their development since they are given appropriate assistance [1]. Apart from this standpoint, C.A. Tomlinson asserts that differentiated approach when it is practiced in the classroom is concentrated on thorough study of students’ individual characteristics to classify them properly into specific groups for further organization of their work on the specially developed tasks aimed at their development [2]. Overall, it is possible to conclude that differentiated instruction represent certain selected learning material with due consideration of their personal characteristics and abilities in favourable supporting environment and when we use various methods of teaching. To put it another way differentiation can be mostly implemented by task, by support and by outcome. This approach may also take place in individual, frontal and group work. Working independently surmises the actual absence of collaboration whether having one assignment for the whole class or an individual one for each student. Group work allows cooperation to achieve the result. Frontal work involves all the students in the attempt to solve the given cognitive problem [3].

Obviously, teaching English implies considering levels of its knowledge. There are many benefits to its application at school for it creates more opportunities for each student to master the language. In addition, it is closely linked with the possibility to develop students’ abilities, interests and their cognitive processes [4]. The implementation of differentiation in teaching requires definite steps that comprise clarification of the criteria to assess abilities and skills, developing differentiated tasks after diagnostic tests, improvement and modification of tasks using all modern tools which are at teachers’ disposal nowadays [5]. Efficient usage of differentiation strategies in teaching English is intorelated with the system-activity approach that provides students’ constant engagement in the learning process taking into consideration their age, learning styles and creating the basis for their further self-development.

Some scholars including A.M. Ryzhikova state that system-activity approach is a special form of organizing the educational process where the main attention is paid to the independent cognitive activity of students and finding the possibilities of its extension. The activity-based approach gives students the chance to transform reproductive knowledge into more active that is productive [6]. One of the most important constituent parts of the system-activity approach

is singling out the most effective kinds of activities that can promote sufficient students' engagement and getting necessary satisfactory results in their learning.

While ensuring successful usage of this approach in teaching the English language we based on the principles of activity, continuity, integrity, psychological comfort, variability creativity and others. The students in this case become the participants of the exploratory process. They are not given the task just to fulfill. On the contrary, they take part in its practical transformation leading to the effective learning result [7]. We also studied the technologies to use for maintaining the given approach in the class. Describing differentiation and inclusion we state that a good example of permeation is the Kagan method of teaching which is a cooperative learning strategy and it helps to improve students' achievements in learning English. Kagan aims to promote whole-class engagement and enjoyment [8].

The research group states that its scientific novelty is in the attempt to prove that all students can benefit from differentiation but common attitude when more attention is paid to less able students has to be enriched by specially created track of development of gifted students who in their turn can take a certain part in helping to teach weaker students. Being intensively engaged in the lesson they advance quicker alongside with helping the teacher in the work with the other students in the class.

Research methods

In the process of the research the set of theoretical and empirical methods were used namely the analysis of methodological literature, observation, experiment, the method of quantitative analysis. The research group analyzed the theory of the problem, collected and systematized empirical material. To achieve that the survey covering 60 teachers of innovative schools in Petropavlovsk and North Kazakhstan region was conducted, sets of lessons were given by trainee teachers primarily in senior grades in CSI "Lycee "BEST", the First IT Lycee, the First Gymnasium, NIS of Chemistry and Biology in Petropavlovsk. One group of students in each class was defined as experimental and the other group as a control one. The research was done in three stages: initial, forming and final.

Research results

The study was conducted in innovative schools of Petropavlovsk. Its aim was to prove effectiveness of differentiation in teaching English. Initially the survey was conducted. Its results demonstrated that this method is used by the teachers but they require a wider range of techniques to apply. 80 per cent of them use 5 or 6 kinds of techniques and the choice is either common or random. During the research we organized webinars for teachers to get acquainted with a range of possibilities in using differentiation more widely. Secondly, the track of special tasks for gifted students was developed and practiced in experimental groups. The level of students' proficiency in English was checked. The extension in use of differentiation approach led to its increase by 12 per cent.

Discussion

The implementation of differentiation strategies in teaching English was in the focus of our research. The special attention was paid to expanding their use as a means of improving students' language competencies in the process of learning the English language. The subject of the research was the exploration the means of implementing differentiated learning of the English language. All teachers are now expected to take account of the fact that needs of children and young people can vary a great deal and influence their teaching accordingly. In our study we primarily relied on the strategic provisions. Firstly, a differentiated learning process requires the insight into each student's personality as everyone has their own individual characteristics. Secondly, the development of personal characteristics of a student is not a goal

when we use differentiation approach in teaching practice but a means of it. Finally, it is achievable to ensure the use of a personality-oriented learning approach by uncovering students' individual characteristics as this allows teachers to create necessary scaffolding strategy and promote general moving ahead.

Having analyzed the use of differentiated instruction in Kazakhstani schools our research group came to the conclusion that there are some stumbling blocks in the matter. Most experienced teachers are well aware of the so called individual approach from the previous school system which required to work with the whole class or a group but focus on some students when necessary. In this case weaker students were in the centre of attention. That approach was obviously positive. At the same time, being compared to differentiation it concedes as a new approach is much wider. It includes the work with every student and defining their level, abilities, interest and so on. The progress of each student through properly selected set of tasks has to be achieved. However, differentiation is something that teachers find hard to perceive or grasp. Nowadays teachers have a wide range of diagnostic tools to explore individuals. In addition they are provided with various methods and techniques which are for all students. Differentiation requires the right choice of them which presents a significant difficulty for many teachers. Moreover, teachers experience problems when they have to differentiate the educational material. This new approach saves time and also gives students advantages to deal with tasks as they are differentiated in accordance with their personal traits and abilities. Besides, they can work at their own pace and favourable atmosphere allows them to get better results as progress at any stage keeps students motivated.

The results of our study have shown that the appropriate application of differentiated approach is useful for students while mastering the English language, these strategies help develop their abilities and interests, teach them to use the time effectively, create language environment and possibilities for cooperation.

Another advantage of differentiated instruction is intensive mental activity at different levels which promotes progress for everyone without frustration for weaker students. When the tasks are given, they are different. For example, you have to explain the use of a grammar item in the given sentences at the first level, the second level requires filling the blanks using necessary grammar rules, when you are an advanced student you are to provide your own examples with new grammar and vocabulary. When trainee teachers differentiated by outcome doing reading, for instance, the weaker students had to answer the questions given by the teacher, more experienced group had to make up their own questions and know the answers or they could retell the text on the basis of the given questions and advanced students retold the text without support. During the experiment we assessed students at every lesson using formative assessment on the basis of the developed criteria using self, peer and teacher's assessment. The improvement accounted from 0.2 to 2.9 percent at every lesson. The third option was differentiation by support. The example of it is organizing writing. The students were to write a report about sports clubs in the area. Weaker students were offered to use the model answer changing the words or phrases by those given in the word power bank and then complete the letter. More advanced students were given the task and the structure what points to cover. The results for such assignments improved from 0.3 to 2.1 each time when it was completed. Moreover, we enlarged the use of scaffolding strategies such as connection to background knowledge, graphic organizers, sentence structures or starters, intentional small group or partner work and modeling.

Doing our research we worked with students and teachers. A number of teachers were offered to be an experimental group to use differentiation techniques chosen by the researches

on a regular basis. To three basic ones we added learning styles and Kagan techniques based on a cooperative learning strategy. They could choose any 5 or 6 from the given list. The teachers needed to choose one or two most effective and at least one preferable for students. The techniques Three Step Interview, Numbered Heads Together, Rally Robin, Roving Reporter, Rally Coach and Showdown proved to be useful as they provided complete and constant engagement and were good for expressing and exchanging students' ideas. The students' preferences were those allowed the possibility of free expressing thoughts, moving around the classroom to find the information from other students. Another group of teachers agreed to be a control one. A comparative analysis showed the difference in the results of final tests. The level of students' competences has increased in the experimental group more than in the control group.

According to the objectives we made an attempt to prove the necessity of expanding differentiation in teaching English in particular, analyzed the work of a number of teachers and trainee teachers. We explored the teachers' management work and the students' creative activities, common and differentiated forms of instruction in teaching English in different groups and classes. A set of differentiated exercises was developed, we attempted to ensure the transition of the teachers to free choice of methods and increase autonomous work of students.

Evaluation and self-assessment criteria were proposed. The experiment was carried out in the schools of Petropavlovsk.

Our practice showed that we can define five top Kagan techniques which proved to be more effective in teaching English. The work happened in a team or a group and we observed the main principles of team work which are positive independence, giving freedom of expressing, individual accountability, forming responsibility, then equal participation and simultaneous interaction that is necessary for the English language acquisition. Our research group compiled a set of "Must-Haves" to have in the English classroom to help with differentiation and the most important ones are thesauruses, model answers, keyword displays, a list of command words connected to Bloom's Taxonomy, a variety of books connected to English, a box in which students can leave notes indicating what they do not understand or what they are having trouble with, scrap paper on which students can plan and practice. Moreover students are given the chance to propose various options for the types of activities that they prefer to perform in the classroom, to propose a thematic series for discussion, to suggest what role they would like to perform in the distribution of work, in which project they would like to become managers. The differentiation techniques were used by trainee teachers regularly when they delivered English lessons at the schools of Petropavlovsk and the research group had sufficient material for analysis and making valid conclusions on the basis of the obtained information. The work with gifted students implied the following:

1) Making tier-based assignments.

Assignments with tiers let students accomplish the same task at several levels of difficulty. We allowed each learner to demonstrate understanding by altering the level of difficulty. Some teachers did this by creating a task for the intermediate tier and then included an extra challenge for the talented kids. For instance, you might require talented students to use a skill in two different ways rather than just one. Some teachers favor designing the lesson for the gifted children and then differentiating by offering assistance to the rest students in the class.

2) Enabling accelerated learning for bright students. We allowed students who were familiar with the topic to approach the courses in a different way by administering a pre-assessment at the beginning of each unit. A gifted student might concentrate on an individual project relating to the subject, or perhaps they could skip some of the earlier assignments. The

more talented students were given fewer instructions and worked work on two assignments simultaneously.

3) Providing unstructured or self-guided tasks and activities. Students applied their ideas to open-ended projects, which could be approached in a variety of valid ways. Additionally, an open-ended task encouraged higher-order thinking. Gifted students were given a vote how far to choose to push their own learning. The students responded creatively to more challenging questions, challenged one another, and thought of other methods to spark deeper inquiry. Several gifted students conducted independent research whenever they had free time.

4) Setting up cluster groups.

According to research, gifted students in the same grade were placed together. Trainee teachers combined resources by joining gifted students from several classrooms to study more about a certain subject in-depth. Another grouping was full inclusion meaning a mixed ability team including one or two successful students, two or three average learners and one or two underachievers. The experiment showed that the learners realized their dependence, more responsibility and advanced students could help weaker ones.

5) Posing inquiries that are thought-provoking.

Open-ended, more introspective questions were included while creating lesson plans

The study was also focused on extensive use of differentiation for gifted students. We have concluded that the more able learners need to feel challenged. Their input gave support for weaker learners. They were given more challenging instructional tasks and they got additional contextualized problems. We have formulated the special functions for gifted students in the English classroom namely special roles in class: consultancy, peer teaching, peer assessment, extra tasks for fast finishers, summaries after reading and listening, presenting new lexical resource, weekly assignments as an essay on topics of their choice, vocabulary keeping, presenting, implementing, public speaking. The results obtained proved their positive impact on the students.

Conclusion

To conclude, our research proved that there are three main approaches to structure activities to ensure effective differentiation in teaching English: Stepped activities. These are tasks that contain a series of separate activities, with the difficulty level raised each time. Open activities when a teacher sets the guidelines and the students decide how they will go about meeting these and freedom of choice. Practice in language groups proved that properly organized differentiation improves the process of developing language competences and allows to mould an intergrated personality of a student. The peculiarities of application of differentiation techniques concerning gifted students were investigated and most effective methods were defined. Thus expanding differentiated strategies enabled us to vary the process of teaching English which led to the improvement of students' language competences and promote the development of their abilities and interests.

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