

## **DIFFERENTIATING THE ESL READING COMPREHENSION CLASSROOM FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

**Dr. Justina C. Anyadiegwu**

Department of English Language and Literature

Nwafor Orizu College of Education

Nsugbe

---

**ABSTRACT:** *There is a growing need today for teachers to tailor their instructions to meet the different learner profile and learning styles in the classroom. The ESL teacher has greater challenges given that the English language has become a global language, and that most ESL classrooms include students with a wide variety of academic needs, cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and languages. Differentiated instruction is the panacea to cater for all these challenges faced by the ESL teacher in this globalized era. In a differentiated classroom, the teacher closely assesses and monitors skills, knowledge levels and interests to determine effective ways for all students to learn; thereby ensuring learner-centredness, equity and inclusive education. This paper explores how content, method, material and assessment can be differentiated in a Reading Comprehension English as a Second Language class. The issues in this paper are based on the social development theory as propounded by Vygotsky (1978).*

**KEYWORDS:** ESL, differentiation, reading comprehension, inclusive education

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

Certain practices have been discovered to be prevalent amongst teachers in classrooms in general and the ESL classroom in particular. Such practices as teacher-driven lessons characterised by excessive text dependence, the teacher 'telling, talking and chalking' and the learners merely listening still hold sway in the ESL classroom. This is against the age long maxim that *telling is not teaching and learning is not listening*. The practice does not encourage learner-centredness, differentiation and inclusive education; concepts that have been greatly advocated by the 21st Century educators and researchers. This paper explicates certain key concepts that relate to the topic vis-à-vis ESL, differentiation, learner-centredness and inclusive learning. It also explores the approaches to differentiate the ESL classroom as well as demonstrate classroom application of differentiating an English language lesson. It finally hinges as well as relates this work to Lev Vygotsky's social learning theory.

### **English as a Second Language (ESL)**

English as a Second Language (ESL) simply means teaching/learning of English to people whom English is not their first language or their mother tongue. Either these people live in an English-speaking country or that a country as a matter of policy adopts English as a national/official language of the country such as we have in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the issue of a national language is a volatile one and no indigenous language is, at least for now, acceptable to Nigerians as a national language. English therefore, owing to its neutrality, has become the national language, the official language or the nation's *lingua franca*. Consequently, the English language is taught as a second

language in Nigeria. A second language, also known as L2, is that which an individual imbibes after acquiring the first language also known as L1 or the mother tongue. The second language is synonymous with language learning. Language learning is a conscious effort of an individual to imbibe another language (L2) after acquiring the first language. It involves receiving information about the language, transforming it into knowledge through intellectual effort and storing it through memorization. The concept of language learning is linked to the traditional approach of language teaching and learning. The emphasis is on the students to understand the structure and the rules of the language through the application of intellectual and logical deductive reasoning. Teaching and learning is governed by the deeds of division, planned and predetermined syllabus. Correctness is emphasised while errors are repressed by the teacher who is an authority. There is also a place called 'school' and 'classroom' where the learning process takes place (Anyadiewu and Nzekwu, 2015).

### **Differentiated Instruction**

With the current globalised classroom of diversity of types of learners, the need for a differentiated instruction model to cater for these different diversities in learners has arisen. Differentiation is individual student centered, with a focus on appropriate instructional and assessment tools that are fair, flexible, challenging, and engage students in the curriculum in meaningful ways. It is an organized, yet flexible way of proactively adjusting teaching and learning methods to accommodate each child's learning needs and preferences to achieve maximum growth as a learner. Differentiation stems from beliefs about differences among learners, how they learn, learning preferences, and individual interests (Anderson, 1993). Anyadiiegwu and Nzekwu (2016) remark that differentiation entails:

meeting students where they are, and not where the curriculum says they will be; and thereafter, taking them to where they ought to be. It is teaching that takes into account learner's abilities and challenges so that instruction matches not only the subject being taught but also the learner's needs. It goes beyond accommodating these learners' differences to seeing diversity as an array of strength to build on. Differentiation must be student-driven and must be seen in terms of content (subject matter), process (materials and methods) and assessment. Learners' choices, abilities, interests, experiences, backgrounds, etc., should determine the content, process and assessment of the learners.

Differentiated instruction and assessment(also known as differentiated learning or, in education, simply, differentiation) is a framework or philosophy for effective teaching that involves providing different students with different avenues to learning (often in the same classroom) in terms of: acquiring content; processing, constructing, or making sense of ideas; and developing teaching materials and assessment measures so that all students within a classroom can learn effectively, regardless of differences in ability (Tomlinson, 2001). Students vary in culture, socioeconomic status, language, gender, motivation, ability/disability, personal interests and more, and teachers must be aware of these varieties as they plan curriculum. By considering varied learning needs, teachers can develop personalized instruction so that all children in the classroom can learn effectively (Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiated classrooms have also been described as ones that respond to student variety in readiness levels, interests and learning profiles. It is a classroom that includes all students and can be successful. To do this, a teacher sets different expectations for task completion for students based upon their individual needs (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

### Reading Comprehension

Reading, one of the four language skills, is fundamental and critical to literacy in any language; more so in a second language situation as found in the use of the English language in Nigeria. Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive skill that necessitates the use of different skills such as recognition of letters, letter and word combinations, memory scan, distinguishing the main idea, understanding cause-effect relations, sequencing of ideas, retrieval of previous information stored in long-term memory, and integration of new and old information. Indeed, reading is not a simple activity; it is a psycholinguistic activity. It goes beyond seeing the words and reading it. Reading is “a matter of reasoning involving the meaningful interpretation of verbal symbols requiring all types of thinking, evaluation, judging, imagining and problem-solving” (Unoh, 1994). Basically one can simply see reading as a physical and mental process of perceiving graphic symbols articulating them correctly and attaching meaning to both what is explicit or implied.

### Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is educating all students in age-appropriate general education classes in their neighborhood schools, with high quality instruction, interventions and supports so all students can be successful in the core curriculum (Pambot, 2006). Inclusive education is about how we develop and design our schools, classrooms, programmes and activities so that all students learn and participate together. According to Olaogun, Fowowe and Ashimolowo (2014), it is “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education.” It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies within a common vision to accommodate all learners both within the classroom and the entire school programme or system. Inclusive education allows students to:

- develop individual strengths and gifts, with high and appropriate expectations for each child;
- work on individual goals while participating in the life of the classroom with other students their own age;
- foster a classroom culture of respect and belongingness;
- provide opportunities to learn about and accept individual differences;
- develop friendships with a wide variety of other children, each with their own individual needs and abilities.

<http://www.mcie.org/pages/about-inclusive-education/what-is-inclusive-education>

### Learner-centredness

Learner centredness is hinged on the fact that students learn better when they are involved in the learning process through carrying out tasks and activities. This is in consonance with Confucius' maxim: *I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand*. For this reason, the teachers' role in the class should be that of a guide and a facilitator, eliciting information and helping the students construct knowledge. Learner-centredness presupposes that the teacher is a mere guide and facilitator in the class, directing and eliciting knowledge. Freeman and Freedman (1998) note that learner-centered teachers teach students how to think, solve problems, evaluate

evidence, analyze arguments, generate hypotheses—all those learning skills essential to mastering material in the discipline. They do not assume that students pick up these skills on their own, automatically. Research consistently confirms that learning skills develop faster if they are taught explicitly along with the content.

Teachers most times make too many of the decisions about learning for students. Teachers decide what students should learn, how they learn it, the pace at which they learn, the conditions under which they learn and then teachers determine whether students have learned. They assume students are not in a position to decide what content should be included in the course or which textbook is best, but when teachers make all the decisions, the motivation to learn decreases and learners become dependent. Learner-centered teachers on the other hand, challenge students' assumptions about learning and encourage them to accept responsibility for decisions they make about learning; like how they study for examination, when they do assigned reading, whether they revise their writing or check their answers. They include assignment components in which students reflect, analyze and critique what they are learning and how they are learning it. The goal is to make students aware of themselves as learners and to make learning skills something students want to develop.

Learner-centered teachers search out ethically responsible ways to share power with students. They might give students some choice about which assignments they complete. They might make classroom policies something students can discuss. They might let students set assignment deadlines within a given time window. They might ask students to help create assessment criteria. Learner-centered teachers recognize, and research consistently confirms, that students can learn from and with each other. Certainly, the teacher has the expertise and an obligation to share it, but teachers can learn from students as well. Learner-centered teachers work to develop structures that promote shared commitments to learning. They see learning individually and collectively as the most important goal of any educational experience.

<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/five-characteristics-of-learner-centered-teaching/>

### **Theoretical Framework: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning**

Vygotsky's general theory of cognitive development (1962), was used as a framework for this paper, as it has implications for teaching and learning in contemporary times. The areas of social interaction, engagement between teacher and student, physical space and arrangement, meaningful instruction, scaffolding, student ability and powerful content all become elements to consider within the context of contemporary education. With its emphasis on social interaction, Vygotsky's theory sees the student-teacher relationship as collaborative, with the learning experience becoming reciprocal (Shambaugh and Magliaro, 2001). The instructional environment, including the physical arrangement of furniture would be so structured to promote interaction. Furthermore, the teacher would so design the lesson that instruction will extend the student to just above the student's current developmental level, building on that which the student already knows, but encouraging the student to move ahead into areas that pose greater challenge. In this regard, scaffolding would be an appropriate strategy to access the zone of proximal behaviour. The teacher would again engage students' interest and modify tasks to suit ability levels (Riddle and Dabbagh, 2006). Lesson content will also be meaningful, compelling learner interest and providing a basis

for the use of mediating tools like language. Within this framework, this study investigates the use of the differentiated instruction model as a pedagogical instrument to facilitate the learning process.

### **Approaches for Differentiating the English Language Class**

In the light of the foregoing, certain approaches that ensure differentiation vis-à-vis content, process and assessment, especially in the context of the large classes that exist in schools include:

- collaborative and cooperative learning which is based on the premise that cooperation is more effective than competition among students for producing positive learning outcomes;
- inquiry-based learning which is a process where students are engaged actively to make observations, formulate questions, investigate questions and then construct new meanings, understanding and knowledge that can be applied in real life situations.;
- problem-based learning which is anchored on real life problems rather than on a particular subject area: students investigate meaningful problems, identify what they need to learn in order to solve the problem, and generate strategies to solve the authentic problems.

### **Differentiating the ESL Classroom: An Application of a Lesson in Reading Comprehension**

Anyadiegwu (2016) proposes an application of differentiated instruction in a reading comprehension lesson thus:

#### *Content*

- The teacher presents different passages ranging from family, market, school, church, sports, picnic, agriculture, commerce, information technology, etc.
- The pupils are asked to indicate interests for the passages, and from there, flexible groupings is done.

#### *Material*

- Teacher hands out passages according to groups' interest.
- Teacher ensures that learners with special needs are catered for in material selection. For example, materials could be adapted to suit learner's special needs. This is to say that materials are differentiated using strategies like illustration, simplifying, variation in font size, underlining, providing word banks and glossaries, etc. Teacher talk could also come in as prompts, giving/clarifying instructions, checking understanding, etc. for groups.

#### *Method*

- Teacher activates prior knowledge by asking learners to brainstorm in groups using KWL strategy.
- Teacher uses different strategies for different groups such as, silent reading, reading running races, jigsaw puzzle reading, etc.

#### *Assessment*

- Assessment is essentially formative. However, learners are evaluated at the end using different assessment strategies such as oral questioning, fill in the gaps, multiple choice questions,



drawing of pictures of objects and key words/concepts and use of other graphic organizers, demonstration of actions/activities, role play, matching, oral presentation, summarizing, etc.

- NB: Teacher already should have different tools of assessment for the different passages produced and allows learners to choose from available tools for their assessment.

## CONCLUSION

Educators and teachers are evolving different approaches and strategies to cater for the globalised nature of classrooms for effectiveness. This paper discussed what differentiated instruction means; and the key issues that relate to differentiating an ESL classroom; and how this can ensure inclusiveness, effectiveness. It situated the basis for the position of the paper on Lev Vygotsky's theory of social learning. It suggested approaches that engender differentiation in the ESL classroom, and finally demonstrated the application of differentiation using a reading comprehension lesson.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, J. (1993). Is a communicative approach practical for teaching English in China? Pros and cons. *System*, (21), 471-480.
- Anyadiiegwu, J. C. (2016). Differentiating content, method, material and assessment in the ESL classroom. Unpublished paper.
- Anyadiiegwu, J.C. and Nzekwu, I. (2015). *Methods of Teaching English*. Onitsha: D-Bell Graphics.
- Freeman, Y. and D. Freedman. (1998). *ESL/EFL Teaching Principles for Success*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lawrence-Brown, D. (2004). Differentiated Instruction: Inclusive Strategies for Standards Based Learning that Benefit the Whole Class. *American Secondary Education*, 32(3), 34-62.
- Olaogun, G.O; Fowowe, S.S. and Ashimolowo, A.S. (2014). *Child Friendly School in Nigeria: Theory and Practice*. Lagos: Gbadura Printing.
- Pambot, E. (2006). *Inclusive Education and Special Needs Education*. Jos: Dekka Publications.
- Riddle, E. M., and Dabbagh, N. (2006). *Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory*. [Online]<http://chd.gse.gmu.edu/immersion/knowledgebase/theorists/constructivism/vygotsky.htm>[18 May,].
- Shambaugh, N., and Magliaro, S. A. (2001). Reflexive Model for Teaching Instructional Design. *ETR and D*, 49 (2), 69-92.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (2001). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Unoh, S.O. (1994). Psycholinguistic Perspective on Learning English as a Second Language. In Asein, Samuel and Festus A. Adesanya (Eds). *Language and Polity: Essays on Language and Society in Africa*. Ibadan: Sam Bookman, 112-131.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- <http://www.mcie.org/pages/about-inclusive-education/what-is-inclusive-education>
- <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/five-characteristics-of-learner-centered-teaching/>