

Supporting Differentiated Instruction Through the 'Crafting the Essay' Enrichment Course

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Abstract: Differentiated instruction is gaining ground in many educational circles as part of the attempt to cater to increasingly diverse classrooms. This paper discusses a case study on the implementation of differentiated instruction in teaching through an enrichment course for gifted children called 'Crafting the Essay'. Interviews were carried out with the instructor and teaching assistant of a class of 15 secondary-school students, aged 13, who were involved in the study which took place during the PERMATApintar school-holiday instructional programme in Malaysia. The discussion in this paper is based on the observations of the instructor and teaching assistant's and on informal interviews with them, as well as on descriptive evaluations of the students' learning. Findings indicate that differentiated instruction promoted students' creative, thinking and writing skills, in greater or lesser degrees according to students' language ability. These findings provide a rationale for supporting differentiated instruction.

Key words: Differentiated instruction • Academic diversity • Crafting the Essay • Gifted children • Descriptive assessment

INTRODUCTION

In a class, students are grouped together regardless of their different levels of ability in different subjects as it is assumed that learners of the same age group should be undergoing the same process of physical, psychological, emotional and mental development. Similarly, it is assumed that learners of the same age group should learn from the same curriculum and be given the same instruction. However, each learner has his/her own interests, learning style and level of ability, as well as different life experiences which affect his/her learning and worldview. This means that each learner has different learning needs and styles which require different teaching approach(es) to cater to these differences. Apart from that, differences between students in language and linguistic ability also pose difficulty if instruction methods do not take them into account. Hence, there is a need to differentiate our instruction methods in response to the learner differences [1].

This situation has become more acute in today's classrooms, which have become increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse due to economic migrations. Educational authorities, teachers and school

administrators should be looking at teaching and learning strategies that cater to a variety of learning profiles; an approach to tackling this issue that is gaining ground in many educational circles is *differentiated instruction* [2]. Since the purpose of differentiated instruction is to cater to learner diversity, the aim of learning should be to maximise each student's learning ability so that he/she can reach his/her real learning potential and perform well in the subject. In this manner also, learning becomes more meaningful and students can come to view it as not only for examination/assessment purposes but also as a lifelong process.

Differentiating instruction is the attempt to provide learning experiences which are matched to the needs, capabilities and previous learning of individual learners [3]. Tomlinson [1] outlines eight principles for differentiating instruction: 1) the teacher must be clear about what really matters in subject material; 2) the teacher understands, appreciates and builds upon student differences; 3) assessment and instruction are inseparable; 4) the teacher adjusts content, process and product in response to student readiness, interests and learning profile; 5) all students work in a manner that is respectful of their teacher and each other; 6) students and

teachers are collaborators in learning; 7) the goals of the classroom are maximum learner growth and individual success; and 8) flexibility is the hallmark. These are mere guidelines. What is important is that teachers need to know what, how and why they need to differentiate.

The 'what' is where the teacher modifies the content, *process* (the activities and tasks learners do to make sense of main ideas and concepts) and *product* (how learners demonstrate and make use of what they understand and learn how to do), as well as the *learning environment* (the classroom conditions that determine the tone and learning goals). Any one of these elements can be modified to suit a particular lesson or subject matter. The 'how' refers to the student traits, ability and proficiency (e.g. in a language class) to which the teacher orientates differentiation. This reflects the teacher's response to student readiness, interest, proficiency, or learning profile. Finally, the 'why' is the purpose behind the teacher's differentiation efforts.

Studies have shown that differentiated instruction in education has its strengths. For instance, studies on *multiple intelligences* have shown that creating opportunities for all students and enriching the classroom through multiple techniques and assessment forms will aid the development of students and bring out their strengths [4, 6]. Meanwhile, a study on low-performing school children in the Rockwood School District in Missouri, USA reported a significant improvement in the student test scores [7]. The study also revealed that the students were more motivated and enthusiastic than they had been before. Similarly, a study on differentiation of instructions by teachers on undergraduates revealed that the use of differentiated techniques was able to engage and stimulate the students' learning [8]. Another study on differentiated instruction strategies utilised by teachers [9] illustrated that differentiated instruction in education not only benefited the learners, but also the teachers; finding that teachers who used these strategies intensively showed improved individual perception and assumed greater responsibility for student growth.

In the context of the study discussed in this paper, differentiated instruction is also applicable to the teaching and learning of gifted children. This is because giftedness presents itself in many ways. As Gardner [1] proposes that humans have eight intelligences: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical-rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic. Gargiulo [10] further explored this definition of giftedness from Renzulli [11] and Clark's [12] perspectives. Renzulli views giftedness as the interaction

of the three aspects in his Three Ring Conception Model: above average ability, creativity and task commitment. Meanwhile, Clark views giftedness as involving two significant aspects: academic/learning and social/emotional abilities. Sousa [13] provides a psychological perspective that includes the cognitive and meta-cognitive learning style of gifted children. These definitions of giftedness imply that one teaching approach is insufficient to cater to diverse intelligences.

The gifted children in this study are children who show the cognitive ability to understand learning concepts, even complex or advanced ones much faster than their peers. They also demonstrate language faculties that contribute to their ability to comprehend and acquire information. This means that they require instructional adaptation to fully nurture their potential. To engage their advanced thinking abilities, educational programmes should encourage the development of higher-level cognitive processes. Quick learners should be allowed to move through the curriculum at a faster pace than slower learners. If these needs are not met in the classroom, performance suffers and the risk of emotional distress, maladjustment and isolation from peers increases. It is this realisation that has led to innovative efforts to develop programmes, curricula and techniques of instruction to meet the needs of these gifted children. Thus, this paper presents a case study on the implementation of differentiated instruction for teaching gifted children and discusses its potential in informing pedagogical innovation for lifelong learning.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of the case study was to explore the implementation of differentiated instruction in teaching gifted children. It involved the instructor and teaching assistant (TA) of a group of 15 students, all aged 13 years, who were identified as gifted children as measured by the UKM 1 and UKM 2 screening tests [14]. The students were attending the PERMATApintar School Holiday Camp for three weeks and were enrolled in the programmes' 'Crafting the Essay' course. The children were of mixed ability levels in terms of their English language competency. As this was the first time they had attended this enrichment course, they were only expected to have basic ability in writing; writing ability also differed among the students. The students were given a writing task on the first day of the course as a means of gauging their English language competencies in order to enable the instructor and TA to modify their materials, approach

and assessment methods to suit the different students' abilities and group them accordingly. No grades were given for any of the tasks, as the aim of the course, in line with the principles of differentiated instruction is not achievement of high grades. Rather, students are assessed on the basis of the *improvement* in their writings.

'Crafting the Essay' is a non-fiction writing course that teaches the fundamentals of writing a basic essay. In this course, the students were guided to draw on their own experiences and write literary essays and personal memoirs as they explored the nature and function of nonfiction prose. During the course, students read and discussed the prose of writers such as Annie Dillard, Charles Baxter, George Orwell and John Cheever as models for their own writing. Beginning with the 'invention' stage and moving through the drafting and revising stages, the students completed four polished essays. They each wrote a profile, a memoir and a travel essay, among other assignments.

The course took an in-depth look at various styles of writing through interactive, creative lessons and assignments. Discussion explored the topic of truth v. perception. Students examined their assumptions about language and truth and explored the creative elements of nonfiction writing. The activities helped students discover and practice techniques that made their prose more lively and powerful: vivid, precise language and use of specific details; figurative language, including metaphor; and variety in sentence structure. Students also experimented with different techniques for organizing essays and for beginning and ending their work effectively. In addition, the instructor and TA encouraged the students to discover a personal writing voice and consider how voice relates to audience and purpose. The data for this study were gathered from informal interviews with the class instructor and TA to gather insights on how differentiated instruction was carried out and from the instructor and the TA's observations on the student learning.

Data Collection Procedure: The activity reflected upon in this study is a lesson on writing and recording memoir. The lesson began with a reading of an excerpt from Annie Dillard's memoir *An American Childhood*. The students read the excerpt aloud and discussed the tone used by the author. Although Dillard was looking at her childhood experience from an adult's perspective, she recreated a sense of childlike excitement by attention to details. The instructor stopped every once in a while to give students

space to visualise what they were reading. Then the students were asked to write a short memoir about a place that was significant to them.

Before beginning, the students were asked to answer several questions on a separate sheet of paper as a prewriting activity. The questions were: 1) When you were younger, what place did you consider special or significant?, 2) What do you remember about this place and why is it special and 3) How did this place help you realise something important about yourself or about life?

The students were asked to draw a cluster chart to explore their memories of the place and its significance. Students wrote the name of the place in the centre oval and used words and short phrases to capture details, associations and memories in the ovals surrounding it. Then the students were asked to organise their ideas using a basic essay format - introduction, body, conclusion-to structure their ideas. Students were asked to elaborate by supporting and explaining their points.

After writing the first draft, the students were asked to improve their writing by adding vivid language and sensory details, describing the place and experiences exactly as they remembered them. The instructor reminded the students that the aim of their writing was to draw the reader into their memories. Next, the students were asked to edit their writing for irrelevant details and wandering thoughts that distracted from their themes.

After completing the draft, the students checked that it was free from errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. The students were then asked to read their memoir aloud to themselves and then to their peers. This was a practice section, next the students recorded their memoir using a digital recorder or computer. Their recordings were then transferred to the computer's hard drive to enhance their reading using an audio-recording programme to add music and sound effects to enhance the mood of the reading.

The completed recording was then saved as an mp3 file and burnt onto a recordable audio CD or uploaded onto an mp3 player. Finally the students were asked to share their memoirs with their friends and reflect on their writing process by answering the questions, Which way would you prefer to share your own memoir, through print or audio recording? and Why do you think many people find memoirs so compelling?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the instructor and TA, the reading-aloud activity enabled students to 'develop [...]

confidence [because] they were all not very fluent in reading in English'. According to the TA, the students were 'enjoying themselves' when reading aloud... 'like choral reading'. The TA observed the students 'trying to visualise the place' as they read the memoir. When the students were asked to write a memoir of their childhood, they 'seemed puzzled and lost' [...] all the students were only able to write a one paragraph long (half a page) essay and the words that they used to describe themselves were very limited [...] but [...] the questions and cluster chart helped'.

This activity was a means of *brainstorming*, a thinking skill to help students develop ideas of what they would like to include in their memoirs. There was no length or word limit given. This was a free writing task as the aim was to develop the students' writing skills. This also allowed the students to try their best up to their own ability. According to the instructor, *'the students were encouraged to use descriptive words, metaphors or similes as many as they could to make their essays more vivid. There was no length limit to enable students to write freely. This allowed both the good and weak students to write according to their ability'*. Furthermore, *'the aim of the writing tasks was not on accuracy but on developing students' ability to think creatively and critically and thus, write effectively'*.

Asking students to organise their words/ phrases/ sentences developed another thinking skill, the ability to identify main and supporting ideas. *They had to support and explain their ideas so they wrote longer.* Another interesting finding is how the students were 'refining or editing' their writing. They had to read it aloud to themselves and to their peers. This was when the students worked in groups.

According to the instructor, the students were put in groups of three with different language abilities (good, moderate and weak) represented in each group. The purpose was to *'let the good students to help the weak ones'*. The students were observed not only editing their own work but also that of their peers'. This inculcated team work. The editing process also enabled the students to *'identify important and not-so important points'* and helped improve the students' language ability because they were checking each other's grammar.

Finally, the recording activity also illuminated the use of technology in the teaching and learning process. The use of digital recorders and computer to record and add music provided an innovative way to learn. The students *'enjoyed listening to themselves on the computer [...] they tried different sounds [...] like sound effect'*. The

students were then assessed on the basis of their end product as well as changes in behaviour and attitude. The role of the TA apart from assisting in the teaching and learning process was to observe the students' changes. These observations were hand-recorded and used as input for the descriptive evaluation at the end of the course. The descriptive evaluation illuminated each student's outstanding changes in behaviour, thought, social skills and writing ability. By the second week of the course, *'the students' essays were longer (two or three pages) and had more descriptive words'*. Their writings illustrated that they were more creative and descriptive in their thinking.

There are theoretical pedagogical and theoretical implications from these findings that conform to the literature on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory [15] on how language is acquired or learned. In terms of pedagogical implications, the study implies that differentiated instruction enabled the instructor to vary her teaching techniques according to the students' ability levels and make modifications to several activities and content based on the students' ability.

Through a variety of activities, the instructor engaged the learner's attention, calibrated the tasks, motivated the students, identified relevant task features, controlled for frustration and demonstrated as needed. Through joint activities, the teacher and TA were thus able to scaffold the learning process to maximise the development of the students' intrapsychological functioning. The reading-aloud and discussion enhanced the students' thinking process since speech plays a crucial role in the development of higher psychological processes [16] in the sense that it enables thinking to be more flexible and independent. The descriptive evaluation also promotes a fair way of assessing students because it acknowledges students' changes in behaviour, learning skills, attitudes and social skills. These positive effects as observed by the instructor and TA in this study indicate the potentials of differentiated instruction.

CONCLUSION

In short, these findings indicate how differentiated instruction enabled the instructor to modify her approach to teaching and include various activities that were able to cater to the different types of gifted students present in the class. However, it is still common in many countries including Malaysia to apply a curriculum that is still based on goals such as student accumulation and retention of a variety of facts and skills that are removed from

meaningful contexts. Therefore, teachers may find the differentiation process meaningless or useless. Teachers and education policymakers often fail to see the potential of differentiated instruction, whereby lessons are organised around the needs of the class. Although the implementation of differentiated instruction requires much effort, organisation, preparation and commitment; teachers should provide 'the opportunity to learn coherently, at an appropriate level of challenge and in an engaging way' [1]. Learning should be made meaningful to students in a way appropriate to their access to learning opportunities, motivation to learn and level of learning efficiency. It is not an easy task to design or develop a curriculum that can cater to a diverse group of children. But after all, learning is not just an opportunity for high achievers to excel or a chance to help weak learners become stronger, but a chance for all students to excel according to their different abilities or potentials.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The study was funded by PERMATApintar, UKM under the code UKM-PERMATA 1- 2010.

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