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Differentiated Learning Experiences for Effective Ambiance of TEFL Class

Dr.K.Yugandhar

Associate Professor, Department of English, Dilla University, Dilla, Ethiopia, yogi_english@yahoo.com

Abstract

Most of the TEFL classes are heterogeneous in terms of students' capacities, interests and pace of learning. Because of diversities in their backgrounds, they have differences in learning styles, learning speeds. This paper analyzes the needs of good and poor learners in a mixed ability TEFL class to suggest principles for the refinement of high-quality instruction called "differentiation." The class needs to bring the feeling of achievement and appreciation to every learner with everyone's contribution for the achievement of the class through differentiated learning experiences. Based on the variations while learning/using language, the learners are broadly classified as advanced learners and struggling learners. The teacher needs to plan and create ambiance conducive for language learning to motivate everyone to participate in the class within a common curriculum framework according to their learning profiles to make them responsible for their own learning. The paper focuses on understanding variations learning profiles of students, the needs of advanced and struggling learners, suggests a few principles that are useful to ensure the learners to maximize their learning and proposes some guidelines for learning-profile differentiation. The teacher orchestrates the groups of mixed abilities with differentiated instruction using different materials and activities suitable for everyone in the class.

Keywords: TEFL class, Differentiated Learning, Needs of the Advanced and Poor Learners, Learning-Profile Differentiation.

INTRODUCTION

Generally, TEFL class is an amalgam of students of mixed abilities as the learners came from different backgrounds. They have differences in learning styles, learning speeds. Further they have variations in motivation based on one's logistic decisions in learning/using the language. The language teacher facing such a diverse class with two or more distinct levels of ability has to address the problem of how to meet the needs of everyone in the class. The teacher can provide high-quality instruction using "differentiation" in such classes with mixed ability students. Differentiated instruction is a way to reach students with different learning styles, different abilities to absorb information and different ways of expressing what they have learned.

Learning happens best when a learning experience pushes the learner a bit beyond learner's independence level. When a student continues to work on understandings and skills already mastered, s/he learns very 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 (Howard, 1994; Vygotsky, 1962). Thus Stephen Krashen suggests that the input given to a learner should be one step beyond the learner's current point of mastery. Then the environment of learning will be ideal. Motivation to learn increases when we feel a kinship with, interest in, or passion for what we are attempting to learn. Students go about learning in a wide variety of ways, based on individual interest, culture, and gender.

Understanding the Needs of Advanced Learners

In spite of variations in learning profiles, some students may be advanced for a short time, others throughout their lives but only in certain endeavors. Some learners are consistently advanced in many areas. Because the primary intent of differentiated instruction is to maximize student's linguistic proficiency, when a teacher can find or have a hunch that a student can learn more deeply, better to move at a brisker pace, or make more connections than instructional blueprints might suggest, that's a good time to offer advanced learning opportunities.

But advanced learners, like other learners, need help in developing their abilities. Without teachers that coach for growth and curriculums that are appropriately challenging, these learners may fail to achieve their potential. There are many reasons why advanced learners don't achieve their full potential.

 ➢ May become mentally lazy, even though they do well in the class.
 ➢ May become "hooked" on the trappings of success.
 ➢ May become perfectionists.
 ➢ May fail to develop a sense of self-efficacy.
 ➢ May fail to develop study and coping skills.

Advanced learners, like all learners, need learning experiences designed to fit them. When teachers are not sensitive to that need, they may set learning goals for advanced students that are too low or that develop new skills too infrequently. Then, if students are successful anyhow, they often fail to develop the desirable balance between running into walls and scaling them. Advanced learners share other learners' need for teachers who can help them set high goals, devise plans for reaching those goals, tolerate frustrations and share joys along the way, and sight new horizons after each accomplishment. The following principles are useful to mentor advanced learners in the class:

 ➢ Continually raise the ceilings of expectations so that advanced learners are competing with their own possibilities rather than with a norm.
 ➢ Make clear what would constitute excellence for the advanced learner so s/he knows, at least in large measure, what to aim for in the work.
 ➢ As the teachers raise ceilings of expectation, raise the support system available to the student to reach his goals.
 ➢ Be sure to balance rigor and joy in learning. It's difficult to imagine a talented learner persisting when there is little pleasure in what the learner once thought was fascinating.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF STRUGGLING LEARNERS

One student's struggle stalks from a learning disability, another's home life takes all her energy, and another just finds a subject his nemesis. Just like with an advanced learner, the learning profile of a struggling learner may shift over time; for example, suddenly a student becomes an eager reader after trailing the class in decoding and comprehension for some time. Many students whom we perceive to be "slow," "at-risk," or "struggling," may actually be quite proficient in talents that schools often treat as secondary, such as leadership among neighborhood peers, storytelling, or building contraptions out of discarded materials.

 ➢ May become shy and timid, even though they do well in the class.
 ➢ May become "hooked" on the trappings of failure.
 ➢ May suffer from inferiority / superiority complex.
 ➢ May fail to develop a sense of self-efficacy.
 ➢ May fail to develop study and coping skills.

Nonetheless, many students do struggle with the language tasks. They are a diverse group who can challenge the artistry of the most expert teacher in listening deeply, believing unconditionally, and moving beyond a recipe or blueprint approach to teaching to shape classrooms that offer many avenues and timetables to understanding. The following principles are useful to mentor struggling learners advanced learners in the class:

 ➢ **Look for the struggling learner's positives.** Every student does some things relatively well. It's important to find those things, to affirm them in private conversations and before peers, to design tasks that draw on those strengths, and to ensure that the student can use strengths as a means of tackling areas of difficulty.

> **Encourage their strengths rather than focusing on their weakneses:** The difference between teachers and students is that teachers have a choice. Struggling learners are more likely to retain motivation to learn when their days allow them to concentrate on tasks that are relevant and make them feel strong. It's important to avoid the temptation of looking at their weaknesses.

> **Pay attention to relevance for each day.** Learners don't "do school" well today, and teachers keep insisting that perseverance will pay off "someday"—often in the future. Dewey (1938) reminds us that if school isn't for today, it will often turn out to be for nothing. He believed this to be true for all learners. Certainly it is so for many struggling learners. A skilled teacher conscientiously works to make each day's explorations compelling for that day.

> **Teach according to learning profiles.** Know the struggling students' learning profiles to understand their learning styles. Create tasks for struggling learners (individuals or groups with similar profiles) that are a chunk more difficult than the teacher believes they can accomplish. Then teach for success by encouraging, providing support, guiding planning, delineating criteria, and so on.

> **Use many opportunities to learning.** Some students learn best with their ears, some with their eyes, and some with touch or movement. Some are solitary learners; some must interact with friends in order to learn. Some students work well by gathering details and constructing a bird's-eye view of what is being studied. Others will not learn unless the bird's-eye view is clear to them before they encounter the details. Struggling learners sometimes become more successful learners just because their way of learning is readily accessible through both teacher design and student choice.

The teacher becomes as keepers and dispensers of knowledge and move toward themselves as organizers of learning opportunities. They enable students to take responsibility for their own learning under their mentoring. These teachers assess students' readiness through a variety of means, analyze and interpret student clues about interests and learning preferences, create a variety of ways students can gather information and develop varied ways students can explore and 'own' ideas and present varied channels through which students can express and expand understanding. The following precepts are useful to mentor Struggling Learners:

> Be clear on what students must know, understand, and be able to do in order to grow in their grasp of a subject.

> Set important goals of understanding and use of ideas for struggling students, then figure out how to build scaffolding leading to student success in those goals.

> Work for learning-in-context. Helping students connect their lives with ideas and skills presupposes that, as teachers understand the students' neighborhoods, cultures, and families and what connections are possible.

> Plan teaching and learning through many modalities. If a student has heard about an idea, sung about it, built a representation of it, and read about it, success is far more likely than if one avenue to learning predominates.

DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

In a differentiated classroom, a number of things are going on in any given class period. Over time, all students complete assignments individually and in small groups, and whole-group instruction occur as well. Sometimes students select their group size and tasks, sometimes they are assigned. Sometimes the teacher establishes criteria for success, sometimes students do. The teacher thinks and plans in terms of "multiple avenues to learning" for varied needs, rather than in terms of "normal" and "different." The goal for each student is maximum growth from his current "learning position."

Learning profile refers to ways in which we learn best as individuals. Each of us knows some ways of learning that are quite effective for us, and others that slow us down or make learning feel awkward. Common sense, experience, and research suggest to us that when teachers can tap into routes that promote efficient and effective learning for students, results are better. The goals of learning-profile differentiation are to help individual learners understand modes of learning that work best for them, and to offer those options so that each learner finds a good learning fit in the classroom.

Ensuring clarity about where a language teacher expects students to end up as a result of a sequence of learning is fundamental to success. Depending on the learners' present levels and desired levels the teacher facilitates different materials / activities to different groups of students in the class. Offering multiple and varied avenues to learning is a hallmark of the differentiated instruction. This is important because students of the same class are not all alike when it comes to language learning they are different in terms of their learning / acquiring the language.

Categories of Learning Profiles

There are four categories of learning-profile factors, and teachers can use them to plan curriculum and instruction that fit learners. There is some overlap in the categories, but each has been well researched and found to be important for the learning process - Student's learning style, intelligence preference, gender, and culture can influence learning profile. The following are the ways of thinking about learning profiles in students—and ourselves as educators, as well.

Learning-Style Preferences: Learning style refers to environmental or personal factors. Some students may learn best when they can move around, others need to sit still. Some students enjoy a room with lots to look at, color, things to touch and try out. Other students function best when the environment is more "spare" because they find a "busy" classroom distracting. Some students need a great deal of light in a room in order to feel comfortable. Some students will learn best through oral modes, others through visual channels, still others through touch or movement. Although a teacher cannot manipulate all these elements, and other learning style components, all the time, it is possible for a teacher to give students some learning choices. It's also possible for a teacher to create a room with different "perspectives" in different portions of the room, or with differing working arrangements.

Intelligence Preferences: Intelligence preference refers to the sorts of brain-based predispositions we all have for learning. Two theorist/researchers have proposed ways of thinking about intelligence preferences. Robert Sternberg (1985) suggests that we all have varying strengths in combinations of intelligences he refers to as analytic (schoolhouse intelligence, preference for learning in linear ways often typical of school), practical (contextual intelligence, preference for seeing how and why things work in the world as people actually use them), and creative (problem-solving intelligence, preference for making new connections, innovation). Indications are that when students approach learning in ways that address their intelligence preferences, results are quite positive.

Culture-Influenced Preferences: Culture affects how we learn, as well. It can influence whether we see time as fixed and rigid or flexible and fluid, whether we are more effusive or reserved in expressing emotions, whether we learn best in a whole-to-part or a part-to-whole approach, whether we prefer to learn material that's contextual and personal or discrete and impersonal, whether we prefer to work with a group or individually, whether we most value creativity or conformity, whether we are more reflective or more impulsive—and many other preferences that can greatly affect learning. The goal of the teacher is, therefore, to come to understand the great range of learning preferences that will exist in any group of people and to create a classroom flexible enough to invite individuals to work in ways they find most productive.

Gender-Based Preferences: Gender also influences how we learn. As is the case with culture,

there are learning patterns in each gender—but great variance, as well. Whereas more males than females may prefer competitive learning, for example, some males will prefer collaborative learning and some females will prefer competition. Some of the same elements that are influenced by culture can also be influenced by gender. The nature of student may be - expressiveness and reserved nature, group and individual orientation, analytic and creative or practical thinking.

Combinations of culture and gender will create unique constellations of learning preferences in individuals. Patterns of learning preference are certainly complex when we look at an individual's learning style; intelligence; culture-influenced, gender-influenced preferences. A sensitive teacher understands that her students may have learning preferences much like or much different than that of the teacher and tries to create options and choices that make everyone comfortable much of the time. Most of the language classes are heterogeneous in terms of students' capacities, interests and pace of learning. Broadly we can classify class in to advanced learners and struggling learners. The teachers need to plan the classes keeping them during the preparation. The teacher needs to understand their needs and prepare the class activities and teaching according to their needs.

A FEW PRECEPTS FOR LEARNING PROFILE DIFFERENTIATION

Though there is no single way of ensuring that students get to learn in ways that work best for them, some guidelines are broadly useful in establishing classrooms responsive to a wide range of learning preferences. Remember that some, but not all, of the students share teacher's learning preferences. If a teacher were successful in his/her student days, s/he may find analytic and part-to-whole learning a breeze. Some students in the class will like those approaches as well, but students who need more creative, contextual, and whole-to-part approaches may feel like they are working in a fog unless the teacher stretches his/her own comfort zone and teaching range.

Let the learners know teacher is offering creative, practical, and analytic learning choices. Then invite students to talk about which approaches make learning most natural and effective for them. That's also a good opportunity to help students realize that not everyone in the class learns the same way, and that a good teacher works hard to honor many routes to learning, rather than only one. Often, only the teacher can ensure flexible use of time or combination of presentation modes. Even when a teacher does not have time to structure or craft several learning-profile options for a lesson, much can be accomplished by asking students to make their own choices. When students are partners with teachers in making the learning environment a good fit, more is accomplished with less strain on the teacher.

The teacher may, work with Sternberg's (1985) three intelligences as s/he create tasks; using both contextual and factual illustrations for his/her students, or may employ both visual and auditory approaches to sharing information with the students. That's enough to begin. Then, whenever possible, offer the students learning decisions that they can make to further craft the classroom to match their learning needs. It's essential to watch individuals in the class for learning clues, to talk with them about what works and doesn't work for them, and to invite them to make suggestions or pose alternatives that seem more promising. If we can expand our vision beyond the parameters of our own private universe, we become more welcoming and effective teachers of learners who inevitably inhabit private universes different from our own. Manifesting these issues in day to day class work, five proposals are provided to teachers for effective language teaching/learning in mixed ability classes.

> ➢ The use of pair and group work is essential to involve all the members of the class. By pairing off weaker and stronger students and involving both in the preparation and implementation of the questionnaire the teacher should ensure maximum participation

of all the students. The teacher can then get the weaker students to interview the stronger ones and vice-versa. Of course, this may be frustrating for the stronger ones, but if they are able to see their role as that of "helper" or even mentor, it may also have a positive effect.

➤ A second area of activity that can be productive in mixed ability classes is project work. Again, this can work successfully using mixed groups where the stronger help the weaker, but another approach is to form groups that are at approximately the same level and assign different tasks that are appropriate to the level of each group. By adjusting the complexity of the task, the teacher can ensure that each group has a task that it can carry out successfully, thereby providing the correct level of challenge for the higher level students and not demotivating the weaker ones.

➤ A third area is that of homework. If the teacher sets the whole class the same homework task irrespective of level, then the teacher will have to expect very mixed results. Like progress tests, the purpose of homework should be to consolidate class work. To this end, giving weaker students less demanding tasks can help both to motivate them and to give them further practice in areas of the language which they have not yet mastered. Assigning more challenging tasks to the stronger students in the group should ensure that they remain motivated and continue to make progress. It is more work for the teacher but, ultimately, it should produce results.

➤ Choral drilling can be an effective way of involving weaker or shy students. If applied judiciously (in other words not all the time), it can give excellent practice in rhythm and intonation, as well as reinforcing word order and grammatical structure.

➤ Finally, be diplomatic in questioning techniques. Try to avoid putting weaker students "on the spot" by nominating them to be the first to answer a question in open class. Instead, try to encourage a culture of attentive listening in the classroom so that the teacher asks a stronger student first and then ask a weaker student to repeat the answer. It may take time but, once this style of interaction becomes habitual, it can be very productive in terms of class dynamics.

CONCLUSION

Advanced learners, like all learners, need learning experiences designed to fit them. The learning profile of a struggling learner may shift over time. Many students whom we perceive to be "slow," "at-risk," or "struggling," may actually be quite proficient in talents that schools often treat as secondary. In a differentiated TEFL classroom, a number of things are going on in a class with 'homogeneous' or heterogeneous' groups of students. Over time, all students complete assignments individually and in small groups, and whole-group instruction occur as well. Sometimes students select their group size and tasks, sometimes they are assigned. Sometimes the teacher establishes criteria for success, sometimes students do. The teacher thinks and plans in terms of "multiple avenues to learning" for varied needs, rather than in terms of "normal" and "different." The goal for each student is maximum growth from his current "learning position."

Teachers can use Student's learning style, intelligence preference, gender, and culture can influence learning profile to plan curriculum and instruction that fit learners. Teaching and learning takes place effectively in classrooms where information is clearly and effectively organized, students are highly active in the learning process, assessments are of quality and varied, and students feel a sense of safety and association (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Teachers help students to reflect on their own preferences, give students a vocabulary of learning-profile options. The class uses both teacher-structured and student-choice avenues

to learning-profile differentiation. Sometimes it's really effective for a teacher to think about using several intelligences as ways for students to explore or express ideas. Teachers select a few learning-profile categories for emphasis. As teacher begins to differentiate his/her instruction in response to a range of learning-profile needs, select a few categories to emphasize in the planning and be empathetic to students. Teachers try to analyze many students' academic needs and the respective information / material to ensure the learners to maximize their learning and proposes some guidelines for learning-profile differentiation. The teacher orchestrates the groups of mixed abilities with differentiated instruction using different materials and activities suitable for everyone in the class.

Thus this paper thus calls for clarity and quality in what we differentiate in a mixed ability TEFL class. It is a continuous endeavour to try to meet the needs of learners with the best quality, appropriate approaches to differentiation. They provide learners with several varieties of information / activities / learning opportunities that are best suited for virtually all students.

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AUTHORS'S BIOGRAPHY

Dr.K.Yugandhar, Associate Professor of English, has received Ph.D. in English from Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University, Hyderabad, India. He has been teaching English language and literature to graduate and post graduate students for the past seventeen years. Most of his research work focuses on interlacing technology with pedagogical concepts to improve the quality of Education in general and English Language Teaching in particular. He received credentials in ELT from Osmania University, Andhra University, Kakatiya University and Central Institute of English and Foreign Language, Andhra Pradesh, India.