



**Differentiating Instruction in EFL Classrooms
in Secondary Education**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	4
2. Acknowledgements	6
3. Key characteristics of differentiated instruction	7
4. What to differentiate	9
4.1. Content	10
4.2. Process	10
4.3. Product	11
5. How implement differentiation in the classroom	11
6. Assessment	13
6.1. Pre-assessment	13
6.2. Formative assessment	14
6.3. Summative assessment	15
7. Practical Ideas from American Schools	15
7.1. Getting to know the students	16
7.1.1. Testing and collecting homework	16
7.1.2. Individual meetings with students	17
7.1.3. Other ways to get to know your students	18
7.2. Grouping students	19
7.2.1. Heterogeneous groups	19
7.2.2. Homogeneous groups	21
7.3. Giving students a choice	22
7.4. Differentiating reading activities	23
7.4.1. Using different texts or modifying texts	23
7.4.2. Modifying questions or letting students create their own questions	24
7.4.3. Jigsaw Technique	25
7.4.4. Helping student who find reading challenging	26
7.5. Differentiating writing activities	27
7.5.1. R.A.F.T. Activity	27
7.5.2. Giving oral feedback to individual students	28
7.5.3. Helping students who find writing challenging	29
7.6. Differentiating vocabulary activities	30
7.6.1. Circumlocution	30
7.6.2. Making your own vocabulary lists	30

7.7. Other activities that can help to differentiate instruction	31
7.7.1. Learning centers	31
7.7.2. Choice board menu	33
7.7.3. Using authentic videos	33
7.7.4. Using flipped classroom or instructional videos	34
8. Conclusion	35

1. INTRODUCTION

This is an inquiry project I made when participating in the Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program at Indiana University in the fall semester 2015. My goal during the program was to learn concrete ways to differentiate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms to maximize the learning and to meet the needs of each student better. I wanted to familiarize myself with the ideas behind differentiated instruction and the ways American schools deal with diverse classrooms. Most importantly I wanted to collect concrete and practical teaching strategies that could be used in mixed-ability EFL classrooms at Finnish upper secondary schools. I was especially interested in the ways learners of different ability and readiness levels but also learners with diverse backgrounds and interests can best be taught in the same classroom, how to motivate and help the students who need more help and how to challenge those whose skills are more advanced. This paper is a summary of what I learned about differentiated classrooms during the program and hopes to provide help to other teachers as well.

Every student has a unique background, different experiences and ways of learning, and everyone learns at different rates. In Finland practically all students at the upper secondary schools have learned English since the elementary school, but in spite of this, their skills often vary in many ways. For various reasons, some students' English skills are extremely advanced while others find learning the language, new vocabulary and grammar very challenging. In addition, some students have reading and learning disabilities. As Finland is also becoming more and more multicultural and diverse, learning to cope with diverse classrooms is something I find very important.

The USA is culturally very diverse and has been so for a long time. Thus there is also a long history of teaching a wide variety of learners with different backgrounds in American schools. I believe Finnish schools, where the classrooms have traditionally been rather homogeneous at least culturally, can benefit from the experience American teachers have. Therefore besides reviewing literature on differentiated instruction, my main focus in the USA was to meet local teachers and learn from their everyday practices in the classroom.

In order to learn what techniques and strategies American teachers use when teaching mixed-ability and otherwise diverse classrooms, I visited 15 different schools in five U.S. states, in Indiana, Illinois, Connecticut, New York, and California. Two of the schools were elementary schools, one was a middle school, but most of the schools were high schools equivalent to our upper secondary schools in Finland. The schools also represented a wide variety of different types of schools. Besides visiting many regular public schools, I also got the chance to visit a few project based schools, charter schools, and three private schools. During the school visits, I observed classes and had discussions and interviews with teachers most of whom were English, ESL, or foreign language teachers. I also interviewed some teachers of other subjects such as mathematics or social studies.

I noticed that differentiated instruction wasn't common at all schools since most American schools group their students into leveled classes according to the students' proficiency levels. However, I met many individual teachers at all the schools that I visited who were using different strategies to differentiate their instruction. Especially on the East Coast and the West Coast where schools have lots of students with an immigrant background, differentiated instruction was part of many teachers' everyday practices. I was also privileged to meet a foreign language teacher in Indiana who uses many differentiation strategies in her regular

classrooms and who was kind enough to share many ideas with me. The strategies and techniques I share at the end of this paper are collected from teachers at all the different schools I visited and are all techniques that can be used in a language classroom.

Besides reviewing literature and collecting ideas from American teachers, I also attended The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Annual Convention 2015, which also allowed me to learn more about differentiation.

2. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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3. KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Many people might think that differentiated instruction means planning a different lesson for each individual student in the classroom. Although differentiation has similarities with individualized instruction, differentiated instruction is considered to offer more manageable and realistic ways to meet the different needs of students (O'Meara, 2010, p. 1-2).

Differentiated Instruction is a mixture of whole-class, group, and independent learning, where there is continuous reflection and everything is constantly adjusted to help students learn well. Differentiation is not really a method; it's a way of thinking about teaching and learning and there are many ways a teacher can do that (Blaz, 2006, p. 5-9).

According to Tomlinson (2014), who is one of the leading experts in the field of differentiated instruction, there is no single way to define a differentiated classroom. There are, however, some key features that most differentiated classrooms have. One of the key features of a differentiated classroom is that the learning environment supports learners and learning in every possible way. Students feel that the teacher respects and supports them and believes in their skills to learn. Basically the class is designed so that it provides all students access to whatever they need in order to succeed. The teacher also accepts that every student is different and pays attention to these differences actively while planning and teaching a class. Tomlinson (2014) also points out that in a differentiated classroom there should be clarity about the most important and essential things that students are expected to learn (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 14-17).

Assessment plays a key role in differentiated instruction since in order to help a student in the best way, it's important to know where the student is going and what his or her needs and

interests are. Assessment is done throughout the learning and teaching process, not only at the end. It is used as information to modify the lessons and to differentiate instruction.

Tomlinson (2014) mentions that the key components that can be modified and thus differentiated are the content, the process and the product, sometimes also the learning environment (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 17-18).

Content refers to what is taught and what the students are hoped to learn, or the materials or tools students use to learn that information. Process is used to describe what activities the students are designed to use to make sense of and apply the essential knowledge and understandings. Product refers to how the students demonstrate and extend what they have learned. Even at the end when using summative assessment students should be able to have different ways to show what they have learned and can do. The goal is also to help the students become more independent and self-efficient in learning, help them analyze their goals and how to get there (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 18).

In a differentiated classroom, teachers modify these three elements, content, process and/or product, based on students' readiness, interest and learning profiles. Readiness refers to the skill level and prior knowledge that the student has in relation to the specific topic. Readiness doesn't mean the same as ability and it is not fixed, but can vary. Interest is used to describe what the learner is curious and passionate about. Learning profile refers to the ways in which a learner learns. It is important to offer various ways to learn and to help students discover which ways help them best (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 18-19).

Teachers can adjust one or more of the three elements, but it's important to notice that as a teacher it is not often purposeful or even possible to differentiate all the three elements in

every possible way in every classroom. It is meaningful to modify an element only when you believe it really helps a particular student or students in the learning process. And those adjustments differ from one class to another. Sometimes it might be beneficial for the whole group to work together. Sometimes small groups prove to work best. Sometimes the same materials can work for everyone, and at other times it is purposeful to use different materials for different students. According to Tomlinson (2014) there is no single “right way” to build a classroom where a teacher differentiates instruction (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 5, 19-23).

Blaz (2006) also points out some important features of differentiated instruction. First of all, the students have a choice, they can influence what and how they learn and also how they show what they have learned. Secondly, the new things that students are learning should be connected to their interests or something that the students have previously learned or experienced. Connection to something familiar helps the learning process. Thirdly, it is important to make students learn to see their own strengths and weaknesses and to teach them learning strategies. When using groups, it is also important that the groups are not fixed but flexible, the students are regrouped based on ongoing assessments of how the students are learning, behaving, and performing (Blaz, 2006, p. 3-12).

4. WHAT TO DIFFERENTIATE

In a classroom a teacher can differentiate the content, the process and/or the product in many ways. I will discuss them in a little bit more detail next.

4.1. CONTENT

The content refers to the knowledge, understanding, and skills we wish our students to learn. It is also used to mean the methods students use to get to the key content (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 15). Differentiating content can mean, for example, giving students different kinds of materials, such as simple and advanced texts, brochures, newspapers, texts on a computer or printed texts, also audiotapes, DVDs, or offering students to do something outside the classroom, for example going on a field trip to experience something (Blaz 2006, p. 9-10). Instead of changing the content itself, it is more recommendable to change the methods that students use to access the key content. However, sometimes when students are at very different levels, it's almost necessary to change the content itself (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, 15).

4.2. PROCESS

Another way to differentiate is to differentiate process which refers to how students will understand and make sense of the content. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) use the word sense-making activities to describe the process and emphasize that activities that students do in the classroom should help the students "own" the content, make sense of it and see how it is useful outside the classroom (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 15). When differentiating the process, the teacher can offer students different activities or strategies that consider students' different learning styles, interests, or cognitive capacity. Process can also refer to how teachers instruct (a whole class, group, pair, or individuals) and by which criteria the teacher groups the students at a certain time. It is important that the tasks that each group is working on are equivalent and somehow similar. All the work should also be worthwhile and

somehow productive. For example, letting some students always just do drills while other students do creative work isn't necessarily very good (Blaz, 2006, p. 11).

4.3. PRODUCT

The product refers to how students show what they know, understand and can do after a period of learning, and differentiating the product means that the students are given various ways to demonstrate what they have learned and how they can apply and extend it (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 15). Products can be formal or informal and you should take students learning styles into consideration. It is also important not to underestimate students if they wish to do something more challenging; choice is important (Blaz, 2006, p. 12).

5. HOW TO IMPLEMENT DIFFERENTIATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Even though letting students work in groups offer many opportunities to differentiate, differentiation can also happen during whole-group instruction. When instructing the whole group, the teacher can accommodate his or her instruction for students who need that extra help. The teacher might, for example, write key terms on the board so that students don't only depend on oral presentation, give some students a partially completed outline to help note taking, use videos, graphics, and other visualizations during the presentation, or record the oral presentation so that students can listen to it again later. Accommodations can also be made to the environment where the students are learning. There can be visual cues on the walls that students can use as a resource, the classroom should also encourage questions. Often accommodation designed for specific students might in the end be beneficial for all (O'Meara, 2010, p. 77-79).

After the whole-group instruction, it is best to offer students the possibility to practice and reinforce the information that has just been presented. O'Meara (2010) suggests the model of the gradual release of responsibility, which offers a framework to support learners to become more independent. The stages include guided instruction, shared collaboration, and independent practice. After the guided instruction, letting the students work in small groups and work cooperatively provides many opportunities for differentiation. Grouping students just randomly, isn't usually the best way. It's useful to observe and collect data and find similarities in students' needs, interests and learning styles. Based on this information the teacher can form smaller groups (O'Meara, 2010, p. 80). Grouping students allows the teacher to teach and assist specific groups at certain times and let other students, for example, work independently on different materials.

Students who have less developed readiness might need more direct instruction, simpler tasks, a different pace of learning, more structured or more concrete activities or products, which are related to their own experiences. Advanced students might need to skip practicing the skills they already have and do more complex, open-ended, and abstract activities or products, or be given more challenging texts to read. They might need either a faster or slower pace, depending on whether they are working on something more familiar or want to go through a topic more in-depth (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 18).

Implementing differentiated instruction can happen in various ways. In Finnish schools teachers have been encouraged to use more and more technology in teaching in the past few years. Technology can also be very helpful in providing students with differentiated activities. For example, Coc, McCollum and McMurry (2010) recommend using iPods in the multilevel language classroom. A lot of authentic material can be found there such as audiobooks, movie

reviews, news and sports broadcasts, television commercials, movie trailers, PowerPoint presentations, music videos, even lectures. Using iPods allows students to listen to different programs that are suitable for their proficiency levels, interests, and also allows them to listen to the programs at their own pace, even multiple times if needed. The iPods can also be used to record the student's own speech. (Cox, McCollum & McMurry, 2010, p. 94-97.) These days the Internet provides an incredibly vast variety of different materials and I believe laptops, tablets and cell phones all share the similar benefits to those of iPads and they can be seen as great resources in a differentiated classroom. They are, in addition, often considered very motivating to young people.

6. ASSESSMENT

In differentiated classrooms assessment is constant and assessment and instruction cannot be separated (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 17). All three types of assessment, pre-assessment, formative assessment, and summative assessment are important.

6.1. PRE-ASSESSMENT

To differentiate instruction, a teacher must know the students' needs, strengths, knowledge, learning habits, and interests. A teacher can collect information about his or her students through tests and assessment but also by observing and discussing with them. The goal is to get information that can be used to find the best material and the most effective instructional approach for each student. Pre-assessment can also be done using, for example, little surveys in which students can demonstrate what their prior knowledge of the subject is (O'Meara, 2010, p. 52-47). Surveys can also provide you information on the students' interests and

learning styles. It is also good to let the students know why you are gathering information about them. Asking questions about the students also shows the students that the teacher cares about them and acknowledges their interests (Blaz, 2006, p. 25).

6.2. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Besides pre-assessing, it is important to assess the learning of the students throughout the instructional process. This ongoing formative assessment allows the teacher to check student progress and receive information on how to instruct and to differentiate. Since multiple factors affect students' learning, it is important to have assessments regularly. The teacher should observe the learner's state, the environment, and the learning process itself and adjust his or her instruction based on these observations. Even though the stages of instruction can be planned beforehand, it is important to make adjustments throughout the process of teaching and learning (O'Meara 2010, p. 89-90).

Just like pre-assessment, there are many ways to do formative assessment. The teacher can use small-group discussions, whole-class discussions, ask students' opinions or interests using surveys, observe the students, or let the students write journal entries, portfolio entries, pre-tests, homework assignments, to name a few (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 17).

In addition, the teacher should understand that one of the main goals is that the student becomes more independent and takes charge of his or her own learning, knows what his or her learning goals are, and is conscious of how to get to those objectives. Students should be encouraged to analyze their own work in relation to these goals (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 18).

6.3. SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Summative assessment is used to record more formally what students have learned and how well they have achieved the learning goals after a shorter or a larger unit. Summative assessment should be done many times during a course or a marking period, not just at the very end, and it is important to use varied means of assessment (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, p. 91-92). Assessment should be used to help students show what they know, understand, and can do rather than show what they cannot do (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 18). It is important to notice that differentiated summative assessment doesn't mean that students have different learning objectives and that they are assessed differently. Every student is supposed to get to the same essential goals, but with the help of differentiated instruction they will be given different ways to get there and also different ways to demonstrate what they have learned. Differentiated summative assessment allows, for example, some students to use drawings in addition to writing, have more time to complete the tasks, or listen to the same texts rather than read them (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, 98).

7. PRACTICAL IDEAS FROM AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Little research has been conducted on how effective differentiated instruction in a foreign language classroom is (Blaz, 2006, p. 5-6). There are however many teachers who are doing their very best to help their diverse students and trying new ideas to differentiate their instruction every day. Here is a collection of the ideas, activities, and differentiating techniques that I was able to gather during my visits to U.S. schools and talking with different American teachers. I wanted to collect techniques and strategies that local teachers regularly use and that work well in a differentiated classroom. All these activities are used to

differentiate instruction, either the content, the process, or the product in some way. They are also all suitable for foreign language classrooms in Finland as well as in other countries. I have also added some ideas from lectures given by American teachers at the ACTFL convention.

7.1. GETTING TO KNOW THE STUDENTS

To know how to differentiate your instruction, it is necessary to get to know your students' readiness levels, interests, preferred learning styles, and needs not just at the beginning of a learning period or semester, but also during the whole teaching and learning process. Since at Finnish upper secondary schools the school year is divided into five seven-week terms and the teachers do not teach the same students the whole school year, I believe collecting information about your students and using formative assessment regularly and intentionally is very important if you wish to differentiate instruction.

Most American teachers I met mentioned either testing, collecting their students' homework, or having individual discussions with their students as methods of formative assessment and ways to get to know their students.

7.1.1. TESTING AND COLLECTING HOMEWORK

Teachers at American schools test their students a lot more than in Finland, and they often even collect their students' homework daily. The tests are often little one-page tests checking the main ideas of the topics they have been working on in class. While some teachers seemed to use the homework and tests as means to award their students points, many also

emphasized that these assignments are an important way to get information on how their students are learning. They used these assignments as formative assessment and as information to modify their instruction. The teachers also mentioned that using in-class writing assignments especially at the beginning of a semester can offer valuable information on the student's skills and also interests.

In Finnish schools, we have the tendency not to emphasize testing or grading every assignment, but sometimes little daily or weekly tests might be useful and even necessary ways of formative assessment. They can even be tests that the students check themselves, little quizzes, or fun games. A few speakers at the ACTFL convention mentioned using the website <https://getkahoot.com> to pre-assess students' skills before class. It is a website that allows teachers to create quizzes and surveys for their students.

7.1.2. INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS WITH STUDENTS

Individual meetings with students are also a good way to learn more about your students. Especially in many of the project based schools that I visited teachers regularly meet each student individually to discuss their students' progress and to get to know them better. I was impressed by how these meetings had affected the atmosphere in the classrooms and the whole school in a very positive way. I believe these individual meetings have more benefits than just learning how a student is doing academically; they are also a good way to get to know your students' personalities, interests, etc. which is important in differentiation. A good relationship with the teacher will surely also help in the learning process.

Meeting your students individually might often feel challenging in a big group of 35 students and with limited time, but it is possible. It can happen, for example, during regular classes when students are let to work in groups on different activities.

7.1.3. OTHER WAYS TO GET TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

There are also other ways to collect information and use ongoing formative assessment to modify your lessons. A teacher can use forms that ask the students' areas of interest, short term goals, and long term goals for the future, for example. Students can give feedback and express their thoughts after each unit with quick questionnaires. Many presenters at the ACTFL convention brought these things up, too.

At the ACTFL convention, Elizabeth L. Sacco (2015), talked about simple formative assessment techniques in her presentation. A very quick and easy formative assessment can be as simple as the so-called "thumbs up and thumbs down" technique, which basically means making the students raise their thumbs up, to the side, or down depending on how well they understood certain concepts that the teacher just presented to them. Similarly, teachers can use the so-called "fist of five" technique by letting students raise one to five fingers based on how well they understand the topic that they have been working on. They also use this technique to control whether the students need more help. These techniques are very simple, but let you immediately get some feedback from your students to modify your class on the spot. They demonstrate that formative assessment can often be little and simple things that still provide you with the information that will help you decide what to do next in your class. I noticed these techniques used in many American classrooms, too.

I believe in Finnish upper secondary schools where one teacher doesn't normally teach the same students the whole year, discussions with your colleagues who have taught the same students can be useful at the beginning of each term, too.

7.2. GROUPING STUDENTS

Most teachers who differentiated their classrooms in one way or another explained that they use whole-class instruction, especially when introducing a new specific topic to the class. All the teachers emphasized the importance and the benefits of dividing students into smaller groups at some point during the instruction, however. Students can be divided into groups in various ways, for example, based on their interests or readiness levels. Many teachers talked about two kinds of groups that might often be useful in a differentiated classroom: heterogeneous groups and homogeneous groups.

7.2.1 HETEROGENOUS GROUPS

Most teachers who I met and who differentiate their instruction considered working in heterogeneous groups the best, groups where students of different readiness levels work together. Since one teacher is often unable to provide individual help for each student during a lesson, one of the benefits of using heterogeneous groups is that the students can be resources for each other and differentiation can be made more easily. Not only do the students with less readiness benefit, but most of the teachers were convinced and had noticed that the advanced learners profit as well since one needs to process the material well and often from different perspectives to teach it to others.

Students could, of course, build groups themselves, but most of the teachers found it good to assign students to different groups deliberately. One idea I was often told was that when building the groups, it might be good to choose one more advanced student, one lower level student, and two students with mid-level skills for each group. Sometimes groups can consist of two pairs. What I learned from a few teachers is that even when pairing students, it might be good to see that one partner has a slightly higher readiness level than the other one, but that the difference between their levels is not too big. To generalize, it seems to work better if an “A-student” (“10-student” in Finland) works with a “B-student” (“8-student”) or if a B-student (“8-student”) works with a C-Student (“7-student”). Making an “A-student” (“10-student) work with a “D-student” (“6-student”) might not always be the best match. It might sometimes be frustrating for both of these students to work as a pair. But having two different level pairs, and thus various levels in groups of four seemed to work well.

Many teachers who make their students work in heterogeneous of groups also emphasized that everyone has something to give, every student has their own strengths. Different students complement each other, especially in a group. At one project-based school where the students work in groups a lot, they had a rule that if a student faces a problem, he or she should ask three friends in the group for help before asking a teacher. They were encouraged to work together.

In my opinion, heterogeneous groups might work well especially when students are reading texts, for example, more challenging texts like the ones used in the Finnish matriculation exams at the end of the upper secondary school. Most students, even the more advanced students find texts like that challenging and they can benefit from working together. The more

advanced students usually enjoy the challenge of reading them, and they can provide a lot of help for students who struggle with the vocabulary.

7.2.2. HOMOGENOUS GROUPS

Many teachers at the American schools mentioned that sometimes also homogenous groups are the best option, meaning that, for example, students of the same readiness level work together. Grouping students sometimes by ability enables the teacher to teach specific things to specific groups and differentiate that way. Using homogenous groups makes it possible for students to move on at a pace that is more suitable for them but still work together.

Many teachers said they use this kind of grouping when they feel the need to reteach a topic to students who need more assistance. At the same time, some students can also be given additional, more challenging tasks if they already are moving ahead of others. Some teachers I met assign their students to be in specific groups, but sometimes it can also be better to let the students choose a specific group so the students do not feel labeled. Most teachers shared with me that they have experienced that students most often choose the groups and activities that are at their own level naturally.

I think homogenous groups can work extremely well when teaching grammar, for example. After whole-class instruction, the more advanced learners can move on faster to do different exercises, maybe even skip some if they need, while the teacher can offer to reteach some rules in more detail and instruct those students who need the assistance.

Very often homogeneous and heterogeneous groups can both be used even during the same lesson. One English teacher explained that he lets students work in heterogeneous groups when they read and go through an article so they can help each other, but after that when they start writing texts about the topic, he regroups them by levels, so he can go from one group to another and more specifically help the students at their own levels. Most teachers emphasized that regrouping students is important – it is not ideal to make students always work in the same groups. They also mentioned that it is important not to label students as high level or lower level students, but if possible let the students feel the groups are randomly chosen or when possible let the students choose their groups themselves.

7.3. GIVING STUDENTS A CHOICE

In general, the choice was something many American teachers raised up when asking what they consider the most important thing in differentiation. It is useful to offer the students different alternatives, whether they are different texts, activities, how to work, where to work, etc. The teacher can explain how difficult or how much and what kind of work a certain task, role, text or any other material or assignment requires, but then let the students choose what they prefer. Many of the teachers said that normally the students pick the roles, tasks, texts that are at their level naturally. Giving the choice to the students and letting them influence what they do has many benefits. Not only does it help to differentiate the activities, but it also motivates the students if they can work on something they are interested in, and if they can influence what they are doing.

With freedom to choose comes responsibility. It is important to encourage students to challenge themselves to try more demanding activities especially when they are given the

chance to choose their tasks. Offering students something challenging and more difficult should always be something positive and motivating; students should not consider it a burden. Many teachers emphasized that usually students take pride in the fact that they are working on a more challenging task, they don't necessarily just pick the easiest tasks.

7.4. DIFFERENTIATING READING ACTIVITIES

In language classrooms, different texts often play an important role. Here are a few differentiation techniques related to reading that I was able to gather from the teachers I met.

7.4.1. USING DIFFERENT TEXTS OR MODIFYING TEXTS

Teachers who I met at schools that have a lot of immigrant students with different English skills used a lot of modified texts in their classrooms. When reading texts and practicing reading comprehension, students can be given different versions of the same text. The teachers had made easier versions of the same texts by replacing more difficult words with simpler synonyms or by using in other ways simplified language. They had also used glossaries next to the texts to help with understanding, embedded questions before moving on to the new paragraphs, and/or pictures to help students follow the text. Even translations in the students' native languages were used. Most of the teachers that were using these kinds of different versions of the same text had modified the texts themselves which, of course, requires a lot of work and time, but they said that it normally pays off in the end. Some teachers also mentioned using the website <https://rewordify.com/> that simplifies the original texts automatically, but, of course, the language might slightly suffer this way.

Many teachers also used <https://newsela.com/>, a website that offers news articles in various versions rewritten to correspond the different reading levels, lexile levels. This is something that can prove to be very useful in EFL classrooms in Finland.

The teachers who offered their students these simplified or in other ways modified versions of the original text gave each student also the original text. The goal is to bring each student up to the highest level possible and not to underestimate them, just to help them.

Similarly, some English teachers I met give their students a variety of novels to choose from. All the novels have a similar structure and the same topic or theme, but they might differ in the difficulty level. The teachers let the students work with the same assignments and questions, and basically analyze and learn similar things, but by using different novels. Some teachers also mentioned that there are even websites available where you can find novels that have different lexile levels, reading levels, for example <https://lexile.com>. Novels aren't traditionally read so often in foreign language classrooms in Finland, but the same technique can also be used when offering students shorter texts such as short stories and news articles. Offering the students a variety of similar texts can prove to be very helpful.

7.4.2. MODIFYING QUESTIONS OR LETTING STUDENTS CREATE THEIR OWN QUESTIONS

Another way for teachers to differentiate reading activities was to give every student the same text, but, for example, various questions, some surface questions, but also more in-depth questions requiring deeper understanding. Even the same questions can be modified by using slightly more difficult or simplified language.

Reading activities can also be differentiated so that the students can create their own questions and answer them. This allows students to work on the same content, but work and process the text differently. It is useful to give the students a specific number of questions they are required to create. One teacher I met uses these questions that students have created more than once by collecting the questions at the end of the lesson and sharing them back to different students next time. This time, students get questions from other students and they are required to answer them. The teacher can share the questions by paying attention to the students' readiness levels.

7.4.3. JIGSAW TECHNIQUE

Cooperative activities can also be used well in a differentiated classroom. Many American teachers who I met considered activities good where everyone is doing different but similar parts and where students depend on each other. I saw and heard the Jigsaw Technique used quite a lot as a way to differentiate especially reading assignments. The material, for example, a text, is divided into different parts such as parts A, B, C, D, and given to different students. The students can first work in their expert groups, where students with the same part work together and read and study the material together. Later they move to their home groups with a representative from each group A, B, C, D. Students can present and teach their expert area to the other home group members. The home groups can, for example, be named using different colors such as the red, blue, yellow, and green team.

When using the Jigsaw Technique, each student has an important and equal role, and the home group members are dependent on each other. At the same time, this technique allows the teacher to differentiate what students are focusing on. The parts that the students are

working on in their expert groups can have different topics and materials based on the students' interests or readiness levels, for example. Some expert groups can be given easier parts of the material, while other groups can be given more challenging ones. The texts can also be different in length. One foreign language teacher I met chooses either texts with easier language or texts that are slightly shorter for students who might struggle with reading. The faster readers can work with slightly longer parts. Even though students might be working with different materials, each student is still equal in the groups, no matter what the criteria for dividing the material have been.

7.4.4. HELPING STUDENTS WHO FIND READING CHALLENGING

When observing U.S. classrooms and discussing with teachers I could also notice specific approaches that teachers use with students who are struggling with reading. Reading a text out loud or hearing the text read out loud while following the same text in a book was considered to provide great help to students who struggle with reading. It helps both visual and auditory learners when they can simultaneously see and hear what is read. Another thing I heard teachers often use with texts is visual aids, a lot of pictures, diagrams, mind maps, and other visual material.

These strategies can be used in whole class instruction, but also when a teacher is working with a smaller group or even when students are working independently. Now that most Finnish students have their own devices, laptops, tablets, and cell phones in class, it is useful to encourage and let students listen to the recordings of texts that are available multiple times even in class. Most texts that are in our text books have recordings ready for students to

hear. These days the Internet also provides a large number of different possibilities to find texts and audio recordings.

What might also help especially students who find reading challenging is text coding and annotating, something I saw used in many classrooms. These strategies mean that students go through a text looking for words that are new to them and figure out what they mean, they can also take notes about the text, put question marks next to the text, make questions, write explanations, make connections, underline important parts, draw pictures, and analyze the text more deeply, basically they engage with the text in order to make better sense of it. In this way, the students make the text their own and process it in a way that is most suitable for them.

7.5. DIFFERENTIANG WRITING ACTIVITIES

Writing can somehow be considered self-differentiating since everybody is working on their own texts and creating something unique. Writing is often challenging, however, and it is important not to forget to differentiate writing activities either. There are some activities that were used by the teachers, and that can help different students in the writing process.

7.5.1. R.A.F.T. ACTIVITY

One teacher introduced me to the so called R.A.F.T. activity, which basically allows students to choose different writing assignments while still working on the same main topic that has been practiced in class. The students are given a table with different choices for the *Role* of the writer, the *Audience* of the text, the *Format* (e.g. letter, complaint, diary, note, postcard), and

the *Topic* of the text. The students can choose the combination they like best. By varying the format and the topic, for example, the activity can be differentiated for various students based on their interests and readiness levels.

7.5.2. GIVING ORAL FEEDBACK TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS

Many of the English teachers I met give oral feedback individually to their students on their writing instead of just writing comments at the end of the text. The benefits of giving oral feedback is letting the students have “aha moments”. Instead of the teacher telling what should have been done to make the text better, the students can, for example, be asked questions and be helped to come up with the improvements themselves. The teacher is also able to ask clarifying questions about the text. By discussing with the student, the teacher can make sure the feedback is understood. When a teacher meets a student individually, he or she can also offer more personal help and guidance for this student.

When teaching groups of 35 students, meeting students individually might seem challenging and almost impossible. The way to make time for individual feedback meetings in a regular classroom is, however, possible if you let students work in groups. The teacher can take one student at a time to discuss with that specific student for a few minutes. I saw this happen in many English classrooms in the U.S., and I believe these individual discussions are extremely useful in a differentiated classroom.

7.5.3. HELPING STUDENTS WHO FIND WRITING CHALLENGING

Especially teachers who were teaching immigrant students with limited English skills used different scaffolding for their students when they were doing writing activities. For example, they offered some of their students sentence starters, which basically means giving students an outline of a text and letting the students fill out missing parts. Giving students more examples of the structure of a text, what kind of paragraphs (introduction, body, and conclusion) the text is supposed to have is often useful.

Other teachers preferred to let their students use their first language when they were writing their first drafts. This encourages them to be creative and write their thoughts down without worrying about the language at first. This might be useful for some students at least when they are planning their texts and find it hard to come up with anything to say. Some teachers also said they give their students keywords that the students can use in their texts, which helps them get started.

Some teachers also emphasized the importance of low-stakes writing and freewriting especially for students who struggle with writing. It means writing freely, often about something personal at some point during the class. The writing is not graded, not necessarily even shared with others, but it encourages the students to write. It allows the students to write down things even in a messy way. This differentiates the writing naturally as each one is using language creatively and freely and expressing their personal experiences and maybe interests without the worry of being evaluated.

7.6. DIFFERENTIATING VOCABULARY ACTIVITIES

New vocabulary can be learned by reading, writing, speaking, and listening to the language, but it often also requires some extra work to memorize words in a foreign language. Here are some vocabulary activities that teachers I met at the U.S. schools used in a differentiated classroom.

7.6.1. CIRCUMLOCUTION

An activity called Circumlocution was used by a foreign language teacher at one school. It is an activity to practice vocabulary of a unit that students have just been studying. The teacher puts a collection of words on the board and changes them frequently so that there are always new words for the students to see. The students are asked to work in pairs, take turns, choose a word at a time and explain it to each other. The teacher should offer both easier and more challenging words, for example some concrete words and some more abstract words for the students to choose. It is also important for the teacher to challenge the students and ask everyone to pick the hardest words they can explain. Also in this exercise it is a good idea to put students of different readiness levels work together so that the more advanced learner can help the other one, but so that their skills are not too far apart.

7.6.2. MAKING YOUR OWN VOCABULARY LISTS

Another vocabulary activity that was used in some schools I visited is an activity where the students can pick the words from a unit they have just studied and make their own vocabulary lists. This vocabulary activity allows students to use their interests and also their language

level when choosing the words. One foreign language teacher explained to me that she also lets the students define the words in their own words in the target language or use them in a sentence. Students can write these definitions or sentences next to the words on the list. She emphasized that it's not important that the language used in the definitions or sentences is always grammatically perfect, the main idea is that the students process the words in their own way. It will also make them remember the words better. I think visual students can even be encouraged to use pictures in their vocabulary lists, whereas auditory learners can be given the opportunity to record their words and listen to them.

At some schools, I also learned about a site called Freerice (<http://freerice.com/#/english-vocabulary/1385>), where students can practice vocabulary. The program changes the level according to the user. This can also be a nice site for many Finnish students.

7.7. OTHER ACTIVITIES THAT CAN HELP TO DIFFERENTIATE INSTRUCTION

There are also other strategies used by teachers who I met at American schools, and these strategies can be used in a differentiated classroom when students practice different language skills, whether it's reading, writing, listening, or speaking, or grammar.

7.7.1. LEARNING CENTERS/STATIONS

Learning centers or stations were very popular especially in project-based schools and also some foreign language teachers who I met use them regularly. They usually take a lot of work to prepare, but they provide a great chance for differentiation. Each station can, for example, have different activities, grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, or speaking. Some

activities can be more concrete, but some might also require abstract thinking. The teacher can tell which learning centers are the most important or highly recommended, or which stations are, for example, challenging, but students are free to move in their own groups from one station to another in their preferred order and at their own pace. That is why homogenous groups often work well when learning centers or stations are used. When students are working in small groups, the teacher has once again more time to help the students who need more time and help.

I was recommended to have at least two more station than there are groups to avoid waiting. I was also told that it is a good idea to give the students a so-called “running sheet”, where students must write down how much time they spent at each station and how many stations they managed to go through. In some ways this keeps them moving and the teacher can keep track of who has been doing what.

Gisele Falls (2015), a teacher who gave a presentation at the ACTFL convention, mentioned that the centers or stations can be in different parts of the classroom and the students move from one station to the next. Students can also be allowed to work around the same table the whole time and just change the activities. Students can be provided the different activities for a certain learning station on the teacher’s desk and be asked to pick them up there. The teacher can put the exercises into color-coded folders or envelopes, write the numbers and the topics of the stations on the top, and write clear directions what the students are supposed to do at each learning station. After finishing a station and before moving on, the students can be asked to raise their hands and asked to show that they have done the required work. After the stations, it’s important to have an anchor that sums up all the activities and lets them show what they have learned.

7.7.2. CHOICE BOARD MENU

Choice board menu is something I also heard teachers use quite a lot. It allows students to choose different activities to practice the skills they have studied in class. The teacher presents a board of different activities, where students can choose exercises they find most useful and interesting for them. Even though the teacher gives them a choice, he or she also guides the students, makes them challenge themselves. Using this strategy the students can also do independent work. The task the teacher wishes everyone to do can be placed in the center, but other than that the students can choose a certain number of exercises using their own interests and learning styles. Different tasks can be designed, for example, for more verbal, visual, kinesthetic, or musical learners.

7.7.3. USING AUTHENTIC VIDEOS

If students are moving forward fast and there are more advanced students, who need more challenge, teachers may also give them some extra activities. Learning fast should not be considered a punishment, but more like a reward. Some foreign language teachers I met at U.S. schools use authentic videos, and other online materials as enrichment activities for students who are more advanced since these materials are often challenging but most students consider them fun.

7.7.4. USING FLIPPED CLASSROOM OR INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEOS

Technology can be used in other ways too to help the teacher differentiate instruction. One math teacher I observed used a modified version of the so called Flipped Classroom. He explained that he posts videos online of the topic they are going to deal with in class the next day and makes the students watch the videos before class. To check that everyone has watched the video, he uses a Google questionnaires to collect data on how much the students have understood, and whether they have questions. This way he can evaluate students' skills before class. The teacher still teaches the same topic again in the classroom, but knowing what the students had found most challenging, he can adjust the instruction accordingly.

The benefits of flipped classroom are many. For example, the students can watch the videos more than once, which helps students who need more time. The teacher also has more one-on-one time with students who are at different levels, since he or she is not instructing the whole class at all time. Students can move on at their own pace, and this also creates ownership of their learning. Teaching and learning are more personalized this way.

Even if a teacher didn't "flip" his or classroom totally and still instructed in the classroom too, instructional videos can be really helpful. For example, one foreign language teacher I met recorded her instruction during her class and posted it online for the students to see after the lesson. This allows the students to watch a lesson, for example, instruction on a grammatical topic several times even at home, depending on the student's needs. I believe different instructional videos can provide great help in a differentiated classroom.

8. CONCLUSION

My goal during the Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program was to learn concrete ways to differentiate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms to maximize the learning and to meet the needs of each student better. Knowing how to teach learners of different ability and readiness levels but also learners with diverse backgrounds and interests in the same classroom is important because every student is unique. Differentiated instruction provides a way to meet the different needs of students and it is powerful in any classroom, especially in a classroom where students' skills and readiness levels vary greatly.

I hope and believe the collection of concrete and practical teaching strategies that I was able to collect for this project will be helpful for many teachers and classrooms. Even though the project focuses on English as foreign language, the strategies presented in this project can be used in any foreign language classroom. The differentiation strategies were collected at different schools in the United States and they include techniques on how to get to know the students, how to group the students, how to differentiate reading, writing and vocabulary activities, how learning centers/stations, flipped classroom and instructional videos can be helpful in a differentiated classroom. All the strategies and techniques presented in this project focus on students' different needs and making the classroom supportive for all learners.

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