Chapter 21: Reaching Students at their Level: A Model of Differentiated Instruction

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Abstract: Due to the low English outcomes among students in public schools in Saudi Arabia, and according to my observation in Odyssey Charter School, this paper will illustrate the positive relationship between differentiated instruction by readiness and raising the bar on student achievements. By pre-assessing the level of students' language proficiency using a miniplacement test, students are placed in classes accordingly. Teachers tier tasks to three levels to meet students where they are to attain course goals. Through periodic PLC meetings, class observation, and students' testing, the impact of this method on students' achievement will be assessed by comparing their grades to the previous year's grades. This method would greatly impact students' English outcomes in the Saudi educational system.

1 Introduction

400,000 students in Saudi Arabia struggle to meet the curriculum outcomes despite all the Ministry of Education's attempts to enhance the learning outcomes (Ashamari, N., 2012, April). Neither increased exposure to English at a young age nor additional spending on English teacher training have produced favorable results. In Saudi Arabia, public school students start studying English in fourth grade and all the students are expected to meet the same outcomes in spite of their learning backgrounds. Without any pre-assessment, fourth graders are studying one curriculum with many learning objectives. Consequently, most students from all grade levels are two grades behind when it comes to meeting the learning outcomes (Al-Ashikh, 2020). Observing how students are placed in three language proficiency levels in each grade starting from beginners to advance in Odyssey Charter School, my immersion school in the United States of America, has made me think of the positive impacts of leveling the students in ESL classrooms by English proficiency within each grade level.

2 Context and Proposed Solution

The weakness of English outcomes among the students in Saudi Arabian public schools is a clear problem that needs a clear-cut solution. By providing enough evidence of the effectiveness of leveling the students according to their English level, my research would definitely help the students and the teachers which will result in better outcomes in the educational system. By doing so, students will have the opportunity to be in classes where suitable outcomes can be achieved through differentiated instruction by readiness. Being a teacher for four years, I tried to help my students in their attempts to achieve many different objectives in each lesson, especially if they lacked previous basic language skills. To give sufficient support the students need, I needed more than the class period of 45 minutes. I noticed that in all the grade levels I teach, from fourth grade through high school, students' language proficiency level significantly varied in each grade between beginners, who could not differentiate between vowels, to advanced, who could easily lose interest listening to what they already know. Students often felt left behind if other classmates were more advanced in English. Eventually, those students quit trying because they did not have crucial basic

language knowledge like letters and numbers that allowed them to become better ESL learners.

Research supports the idea of differentiated instruction by readiness in ESL classrooms. Much recent Saudi research has proven that the educational system struggles with low English outcomes which have a negative impact on the overall quality of the Saudi educational system. As stated previously, Odyssey Charter School's Greek program has a system in which students are placed in three different language proficiency levels within each grade level. I observed in my immersion school that Ms. Georgia Nikolaou, my Greek host teacher, differentiates instruction in a well-organized method. When I interviewed my host teacher, I found that students are placed in their appropriate language level at the end of each school year based on student's grades in the language course, the teacher's notes and placement tests. Not only does Nikolaou design lessons based on students' language levels of proficiency, she also differentiates instructions of the exam given to the students within the level itself and she spends extra time tutoring the students who struggle with keeping up with the class. For example, Nikolaou's daughter, who is a native speaker of Greek, is also one of her students to whom she gave a different and more complex exam because of her level of Greek proficiency. That way her daughter is motivated to study harder to develop her language more. Ms. Nikolaou managed to meet all the students' individual second language needs and, at the same time, meet the objectives of the grade level (personal communication, December 4, 2019).

Levelling the students by their language proficiency might be the right answer to help Saudi students meet the learning outcomes. At the end of the school year, students will take a pre-assessment test in English, like WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment) or ACCESS (Accessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State) to help provide a clear picture of the students' English proficiency. Subsequently, the results will be used to determine the proficiency level of the students. The students will be placed in a maximum of three groups within each grade. The objectives in each group will be somewhat adjusted to the needs of students but still have the same concepts. Students then will have the opportunities to develop their language skills with their classmates with the same level of proficiency and meet the overall outcomes.

Rationale

Students are not the same. "One size doesn't fit all" is an analogy used in education to refer to the differences between students (Gregory & Chapman, 2007). Students differ in the way they learn and it is only fair if the instruction given to them differs as well. Differentiation is not an organizational procedure; rather it is a pedagogical approach (Stradling & Saunders, 1993). Differentiating instruction is the teacher response to the diverse needs of students through modifying curricula, methods, activities and products prior to teaching them (Tomlinson,1999).

 There are three components of differentiation in planning lessons: readiness, interest, and learning profile. Differentiation by readiness is when the tasks match the students' skills and knowledge. Differentiation by interests in when the tasks are close to the students' passion. When the freedom of task choice is given to the students to assure more accessible learning, it is called differentiation by learning profile (Tomlinson, 2017). This paper focuses on the students' language skills, which is considered differentiation by readiness. Studies have shown that students achieve better learning outcomes when placed in differentiated classrooms

(Gayfer, 1991). "The greater the accuracy of the selection of instruction and student learning strategies, the greater the potential is for a student to reach proficient or higher levels of performance" (Orlich et al., 1980, as cited in Gregory & Kuzmich, 2004, p. 53).

Regarding readiness, the teacher should have a clear idea about the zone of proximal development (ZPD) of each individual student
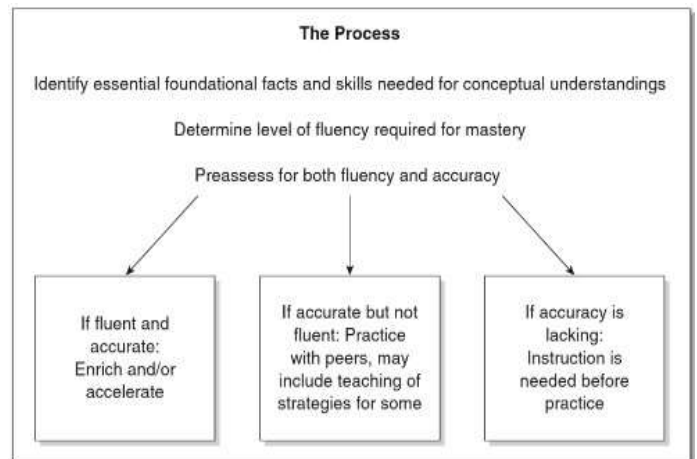
(Tomlinson et al., 2003). ZPD, a concept originated by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and shown in figure 1, refers to the second circle, which is the zone of what the learner can do with the help of the teacher. In order to know the ZPD of each individual student, the teacher must first know the first circle, which is where the students are now. If the activity presented is below or above the ZPD, there will

of proximal development not be any growth made (Byrnes, 1996). Therefore, preassessment is the first step of differentiation by readiness. To place students according to their level of language proficiency within each grade level, students need to take a placement test in English. Pre-assessment should not only be in the form of placement test; other tools like observation and discussion should be taken into consideration when planning ahead a unit of study (O'Meara, 2010).
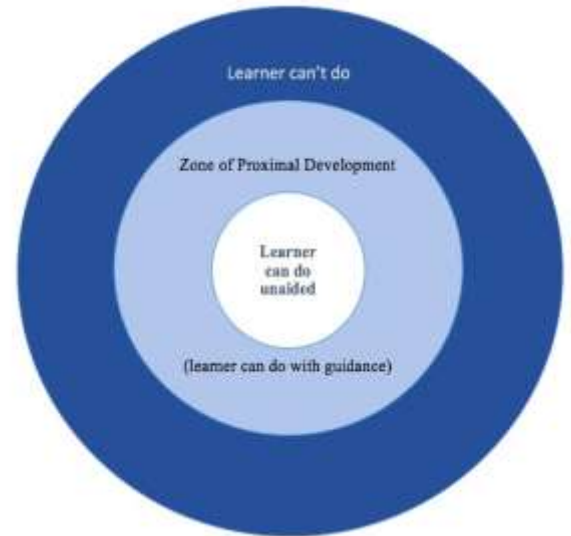
The Decision-Making Process

The point of pre-assessment is to collect enough information to place each student in the appropriate level. Pre-assessment, in this stage, should lean toward diagnostic thinking, which refers to the teacher's ability to turn key diagnostic information about the students into

instructional decisions (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2004). Accordingly, students are placed in three levels of fluency and accuracy of English. In a qualitative study of Figure 2: O'Meara (2010), The Decision-Making Process for the teacher decision-making (O'Meara, Instruction of Facts and Skills, Beyond Differentiated Instruction 2010), Jen, a teacher using differentiated instruction, is working with students whose level of mastery of foundational knowledge varies. As shown in figure 2, Jen placed the students in three categories after an assessment survey that showed where the students were to help each group with an appropriate level of instruction. Group one, who were fluent and accurate, she provided enrichment opportunities. Group two, who were accurate with less fluency, she offered peer activities and some instructions. In the third group, she needed more instructional time and had to reteach some

basic concepts. In that way, she responded to her students' needs according to their level of mastery which resulted in great outcomes achievement. Just as the example shows, placing students into their appropriate level is the solution to the problem of low outcomes of English learners in Saudi Arabia.

Instructional Adjustments

As the teacher collects data and analyzes it, a clear picture of where the students are should be completely formed. Adjusting instruction starts by planning units according to students' needs and the grade-level

Expectations. According to Gregory & Kuzmich (2004), the standards (the grade-level expectations) should not use a "laundry list" approach, but should instead be focused on selecting what makes students proficient. Teachers need to link three major classroom components, which are content, process, and product. Content is the input and making sense of that input is called the process while the product is the output (Tomlinson, 2014). Those three components should be well-defined when planning a unit for differentiating classrooms.

Following the grade-level standards, each unit has to have three levels of mastery. For instance, Nikolaou has to teach her fifth graders how to describe their families in Greek. With the beginner class, she starts the content at a basic level, which was teaching and re-teaching family words such as father and mother by giving activities that focused on the spelling and grammar. After a week, she moved on to the sentence level and modeled how to describe a family photo before asking them to present one of their own. While in the advanced class, she reviewed the family words and showed students some family photos to discuss together. Then she asked them to bring a family picture and present it to the class with a paragraph about the picture. Serving the same objective, Nikolaou differentiated instruction in content, process, and product.

In my interview with Nikolaou, I asked whether the placement test is enough to place students accordingly, she explained that sometimes they use the students' previous level grades to determine the appropriate level in which to place them. Critical teacher thinking is also a way to verify students' appropriate level because of the teacher knowledge of the students from previous school years. She also emphasized that she devoted two hours a week to tutoring students who are still behind expectations to pull them alongside their classmates. With the advanced students, she coached them to achieve the required score in the Ellinomatheia exam, a Greek language proficiency test that helps them with college test requirements. According to her observation in her three years of teaching at Odyssey, this system has a positive impact on the learning outcomes of the students in her school.
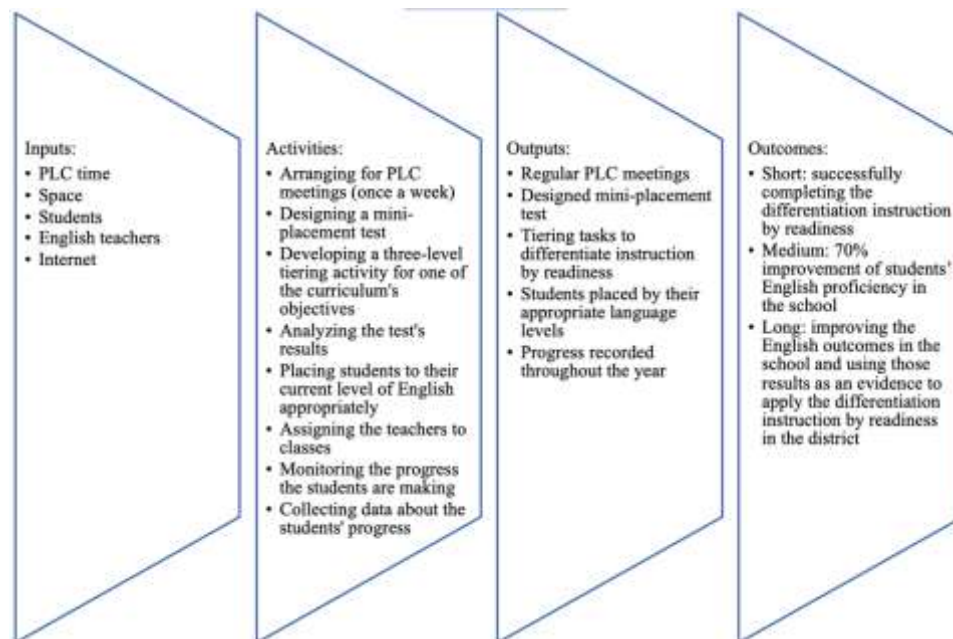
Table 1: Implementation plan.

Action item – what needs to happen?	Completion date – when will it be finished?	Resources – what is necessary to complete this step?	Lead- who is in charge of this step?	Evaluation – how will the success of this step be measured?

I will ask for the principal's approval to place students according to their language proficiency level in each grade.	Before the start of the school year 2020-2021	Mini-presentation to clarify my capstone project	The principal and I	To have the principal's approval
PLC meeting: **Gather with English teachers** **Present my capstone project in detailed presentations** **Give them a copy of my research paper**	The week before students attend the school (teacher preparation week)	capstone project presentation Copies of my research paper My reference books	Myself	Teachers understand the project and agree to be part of it.
Start the plan in action with my PLC: **Designing a mini placement test based on the curriculum objectives** **Work together to design three-level tasks for one curricular objective as an example of tiering by readiness** **Take the role of a teacher-monitor myself to support teachers**	The week before students attend the school (teacher preparation week)	ESL online resources Books about differentiation instructions and activities	English teachers and I	Designed the mini-test Designed the three levels of tasks
Students take the mini placement test in each grade level to determine the language proficiency level.	Students preparation week of 2020-2021	The designed mini-test	Students, English teachers and I	All students finished the test with in that week.

Analyze the test result and divide the students to: **Advanced class (100-85 score)** **Intermediate class (84-60)** **Beginner class (59 and below)**	Students preparation week of 2020-2021	The designed mini-test	English teachers and myself	Students placed in the appropriate classes.
PLC meeting: **Assign the teachers to classes**	Students preparation week of 2020-2021	Teacher schedules	English teachers and myself	Teacher agreements of the assigned classes
Teaching students according to their language level to put great emphasis on their needs by: **Differentiating tasks** **Providing tutoring outside the class for the students who still need the basic language skills by pulling them in their available time as much as needed** **Providing peer-teaching opportunities between the students from advanced classes to their friends in other lower classes** **Teachers exchanging visits between each other to learn from each other**	Throughout the school year of 2020-2021	The designed the three levels tasks	Students, English teachers and I	Effective educational practices and better learning outcomes

The teacher-monitor visits the classes twice a month to support teachers by: **Giving feedback** **Monitoring the progress the students are making** **Give more resources** **Collecting data to measure the effectiveness of the procedure by taking notes constantly and comparing students work**	Throughout the school year of 2020-2021	Note-taking Data-collecting Student's work	English teachers and myself	Collecting enough data to determine the effectiveness of the project

Table 2: Impact Evaluation.

This logic model represents the implementation of my action plan which aims at meeting the students at their language level to guide them to more achievements using differentiated instruction. The outcome of my proposal in the short term is to successfully complete the differentiated instruction by readiness in which students' language levels are well met. This means that by the end of the first month, the teachers would have a solid grasp in tiering tasks to serve the curriculum's objectives, not only tiering activities but also providing the students with the additional help they need such as more English exposure outside the classrooms by tutoring or listening lab. This is exactly what I am hoping to witness in class observations.

The outcome in the medium term is to have 70% improvements in students meeting the grade level current objectives. After the first marking period of the school year of 2020-

2021, teachers will use the students' performance in the mid-term exams to determine the improvements in level among them. Afterward, teachers will continue to differentiate instruction and analyze the students' grades in the second marking period. The two overall results will be compared with the students' grades from the previous school year 2019-2020 to determine the level of students' improvements. Accordingly, the medium outcome is that 70% of students will have higher grades in 2020-2021 than in 2019-2020.

In the long term, improving the English learning outcomes in the school is the most valuable outcome. This particular outcome will be the evidence that I would use to prove that meeting the students where they are in English language would definitely improve their achievement in their grade level objectives. After the two marking periods, I will use the final exam grades to compare with the previous year's final exam grades in order to highlight the students' improvements on achieving the grade level objectives. Recording their progress throughout the school year of 2020-2021 and comparing it to the previous year grades is what will verify the positive correlation between meeting the students' language needs and achieving the objectives of the grade level among the students.

Conclusions

A feasible procedure, which doesn't involve massive structural changes, such as differentiated instruction by readiness, which ESL teachers can apply in their classrooms without any major change from the central educational system in Saudi Arabia, can definitely enhance the learning outcomes. Meeting students where they are in English, by pre-assessing them to attain course goals, will result in enormous change in ESL in public schools. This indeed will help the Ministry raise the overall English outcomes and will ease the learning process for both teachers and students.

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