
Diversity in the Classroom: Differentiation in a FLES Setting

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“When the learners enter the classroom, they don’t divest themselves of their cultural experiences or their linguistic background, they bring all of that with them...It is incumbent upon the teacher to accommodate that wide array of learners.”

Marjorie Hall Haley,

Teaching Foreign Languages K-12 Workshop:Valuing Diversity in Learners (2004).

As twenty-eight fifth graders noisily enter the classroom, I am reminded of the quote above and all that the students bring with them to class today. Listening to their chatter, I hear that they also bring concerns about lunch gossip, bus bullies, recess scuffles, and other distractions. We begin the class by singing a popular Japanese song. I notice that about five students aren’t singing at all, five are dancing at their desks (but not singing), two are bickering, eight are checking their Romanized versions of the song, another five are reading their *hiragana* character versions, and one is holding her hands over her eyes as she sings to prove to herself that she has memorized the song completely. In order for me to reach all of them during this class, they must be engaged, appreciated, successful, and convinced that what they are learning is worthwhile. The group before me exemplifies the need for differentiated instruction. I didn’t always know what “differentiated instruction” meant. For me, a move toward more differentiated instruction began as a desperate quest to find ways to capture the attention and the imagination of this large, noisy, crowd for just 25 minutes three-times-per-week, so that I could make sure they all learn some Japanese, love learning languages, and feel motivated to continue their studies in the future. Happily, this process has helped me to get a little closer to creating a classroom that is meeting the needs of all learners, within the boundaries of the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) schedule. It has been a journey that has required me to completely rethink planning, assessment, instruction, and control in the classroom. In the following sections, I will summarize practices I have found most useful in creating a more differentiated classroom. There are still days, however, when I feel overwhelmed by this task. It is easy to discuss learner diversity in concept; it is much more difficult to comprehend the enormity of variations in what each of our students understands on a daily basis and how they differ from what one might expect. When students don’t know something, I still have a knee-jerk reaction of shock and want to say

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“but I taught you that!” The truth is that I didn’t teach that student in the way that he/she needed to be taught. I probably taught them in the way that I learn best. The process of becoming a teacher who uses differentiated instruction is as much about knowing yourself and your own learning styles and expectations as it is about knowing your students.

Planning

What do kids want to learn? Carol Ann Dahlberg (co-author, *Languages and Children: Making the Match*, 2004), often shares a question formulated by Kieran Egan (1996). He tells us to ask, “Why should it matter to children?” This question has transformed my planning. It helps me to find the problem with almost any unit, lesson, activity, or even a whole curriculum. If things aren’t going well in terms of student motivation or attention, it is probably because I haven’t done a good job at making the unit meaningful for students. They have to want to learn the skills they need to complete a task or project. In order for that to happen, it has to appeal to them for its utility in the real world or, for the younger students, its appeal in a fantasy world. Differentiation is most appropriate when the teacher tries to determine just what it is that matters to the particular students in the class. I recently completed a pen pal unit in which students seemed very excited to decipher letters from three Japanese girls. They were certainly more excited than if I had written the paragraph for them to read. After a few weeks, however, I noticed that the boys in the class were not as motivated as the girls to read and respond to the pen pal letters. The addition of some male pen pals in Japan fixed the problem. Then, the context of writing a pen pal letter motivated all of them to want to write perfect Japanese sentences. They took the task seriously and were highly motivated to learn how to write well. Teachers can also create meaningful context in a “fantasy” type unit. My third graders are planning a Japanese wedding reception for a stuffed monkey and deer in our classroom. They are completely invested in learning dates, talking about cities, discussing costs, and debating about foods. Some have brought in special clothing and stuffed “family members” for the monkey and deer. It sounds corny, but there is context, emotion, and meaning for them in what we are doing. In addition, there is enough variation within the unit content to appeal to many different students. If teachers start with a concept or unit idea that will “matter” to your students, you will be well on your way to reaching all of them.

National Standards: The 5 Cs

A unit that includes activities to develop student abilities in Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities (the 5 Cs) as defined by the national Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1999) has a richness through which many students can find meaning and purpose. Some students “light up” when we are immersed in cultural topics, while others are clearly in their element when we are doing math computations for a shopping activity. When making comparisons, students can differentiate the topic for themselves by personalizing the discussion or project to their own lives. All students seem to find motivation in speaking with an actual Japanese person, especially a peer. If I plan by the 5 Cs and find my objectives in our state framework (Connecticut), I know that the unit will be standards-based and have high appeal for many students. I use the Five Cs as the main organizer to plan the content of all my thematic units.

Backwards Design

Many educators are talking about the concepts presented in *Understanding by Design* (2005) by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. One of the most important lessons of backwards design, for me, has been to decide my assessments very early in the planning process. Before you begin teaching a unit, it is much easier to make sure that your assessments will reflect the standards, that they are meaningful and interesting for students, and that they have room for student creativity and choice. This process also allows you to differentiate the instruction as you go along, as long as you are still targeting the assessment. If some students don't seem to be progressing, I might create a song for the vocabulary, use some Total Physical Response (TPR), do some information gap activities, or use another strategy to appeal to learning styles that I may have neglected. As long as my focus remains on the final goal, I can easily see where students need assistance. Previously, I might have made an assessment to reflect what I thought students got out of a unit. Now, my assessment is the standard to which I teach.

Assessment

When designing final performance assessments, I try to give students the opportunity to enhance their projects and reflect the extent of their knowledge according to their personal strengths. I always have “non-negotiable” areas of the assessment — content which must be included in the final task. Then, I give students alternatives for demonstrating their understanding through offering different choices, extra credit for additions, or a completely “wide-open” area in which students create the final project. For example, my fourth graders learn about Japanese restaurants. As a final assessment, they work in groups to create a commercial for a Japanese restaurant. The commercial must contain prices, a menu poster, some dialogue, a description of what foods they offer, and the telephone number. The students design the commercial themselves, including the actual wording and props. The commercials vary widely, from students singing their own restaurant jingles to break dancing to presenting elaborate foods made of paper. Students watch each other's performance on the final DVD and peer-score the results. This assessment combines with other assessments during the unit to give a complete picture of student progress.

Instruction

After designing the final assessment, I also web my units of instruction according to Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (1983). I cannot possibly teach to all the intelligences every class. In 25 minutes, we do usually manage to do some Total Physical Response, some singing or rapping, some reading, and some interaction in pairs or groups. When pairing or grouping, I try to consider differing ability levels and strengths whenever possible. In each unit, I try to plan at least one activity that appeals to each intelligence. For example, in a unit about school and students in Japan and the U.S., the lessons include working with large photos and a map of a Japanese school, “rapping” the school subjects, listening to real Japanese students describe themselves, writing a letter to Japan describing oneself, describing a friend to the class, working in pairs to make sentences about likes/dislikes, charting likes/dislikes and comparing to a Japanese class, figur-

ing out percentages of students that like various subjects and hobbies, and role-playing a teacher visit to your home. Along the way, most students find at least one or two activities that appeal directly to their strengths. Hopefully, students develop all of their intelligences as they participate in the unit. Even with careful planning, it is easy to slip back into teaching to one's own stronger intelligences or learning styles. When students seem to be struggling with vocabulary or concepts in a unit that is otherwise meaningful and engaging, a jolt of instruction that appeals to other intelligences is sometimes the key. If I add movement, music, or rhythm, most of my students will quickly pick up difficult vocabulary or phrases (think of all the songs you know). For reading activities, many students internalize concepts better when they can touch and manipulate characters and words with flashcards at their desks. Writing Japanese characters with a brush beautifully combines visual, kinesthetic and verbal/linguistic learning. It is usually when a set of lessons has been too easy to plan, or seems very logical to me (and my strengths!), that my students' faces remind me to offer some more varied activities such as these.

Control

The most challenging part of differentiated instruction is the relinquishment of some control of the classroom. When I am not instructing within my own learning style, it feels a little uncomfortable. When students are working in cooperative groups, the classroom is noisy and chaotic. When I am waiting for students to come up with answers *on their own*, sometimes I feel impatient. When I am helping students set up the elaborate props for their video projects, I wonder why I can't just give a paper-and-pencil test anymore. The joys, however, are in the results. It is when the students find their own voice in Japanese and use it to communicate in their own styles that they truly learn and remember how fun it was to learn.

Conclusion

With so many students and very little time, I cannot delve into differentiated instruction as much as I would like. In a homeroom or immersion setting, I would be able to identify students' specific strengths and weaknesses and offer them more tailored instruction, content, and assessment. The efforts that I make to differentiate combine the methods that are known to reach the most students along with a balancing act of activities that appeal to a variety of students. Every lesson is not a perfect example of differentiation, but when it does work, I can tell. The chatter has stopped, the kids are engaged, and they say "that class went by too fast!"

References

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