

ESSAY - Strategies for Differentiated Instruction

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Abstract

How literacy develops has been of interest to scholars and practitioners of literacy for at least the past century. The Vygotskian perspective of literacy emphasizes social interaction but places less emphasis on stages of behavior. Children build new concepts by interacting with others, such as teachers, who either provide feedback or help them accomplish a task. Based on this knowledge, differentiated instruction applies an approach to teaching and learning that gives students multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas. Vygotsky realized this over a hundred years ago and did studies on what a child can do on their own and what they can do with guidance. This is the same model of differentiated instruction. In a differentiated classroom teachers are guiding their students as they work in groups or on activities. Students are allowed to learn at their own pace and learn in a variety of ways. The challenge comes in when teachers are preparing activities to meet these needs. These activities include individual, small group and whole group.

Strategies for Differentiated Instruction

To differentiate instruction is to recognize students' varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning and interests, and to react responsively. Differentiated instruction is a process to teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class. The intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting the learning process. Not all students are alike. Based on this knowledge, differentiated instructions applies an approach to teaching and learning that gives students multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas.

Differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms. According to Vygotsky's theory and notion of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), there is a gap between a learner's current or actual development level, which is determined by independent problem-solving and the learner's emerging or potential level of development.

A classroom that include this theory and makes the best use of its students' ZPD should remember the following guidelines.

- The teacher should act as a scaffold, providing the minimum support necessary for a student to succeed.
- The teacher should, without denying the student's needs to build his or her own foundation.

- Find the optimal balance, which is challenging, between supporting the student and pushing the student to act independently. The teacher should stay one step ahead of the student.
- To effectively scaffold students, a teacher should also have an awareness of the different roles students and teachers assume throughout the process.

The following strategies could be implemented in a classroom which is supporting the theory of differentiated instruction. Activities include individual, small group and whole group. The activities are also targeted for students who show a need in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and writing.

Individual

The student will participate in an active hands-on manipulative activity where he or she will discover sound-letter relationships and learn how to look for patterns in words. They also learn that changing just one letter or even the sequence of the letters changes the whole word. The procedure is as follows: Create various word lists and write the words on index cards from shortest to longest. The large letter cards will be placed in a pocket chart. Then hold up and name the letters on the large letter cards as the student holds up their matching small letter cards. The student will then be directed to take two letters and make a new word. The student will use the word in a sentence after the teacher and student say the word together.

Small Group

To best fit the needs of students in a small group setting, Create centers through which each group will rotate. Although the students will participate in the same centers, each group will have the opportunity to be working at their ability level for each activity. For example, each group will use books, vocabulary lists, and skills from their ability level.

Students will participate in the following centers: guided reading, writing center, browsing boxes, listening center, overhead center, game center, ABC center, and the computer center. The classroom teacher will participate in the guided reading center with the students. It is the students' responsibility to remain on task at the centers while using their peers for support while being supervised by classroom aides, volunteers, or parents.

Guided Reading: Students join the instructor for a variety of literacy activities. The activities chosen provide instruction to the group's challenging areas. The skills may vary from reading activities to addressing skills using phonics and phonemic awareness.

Writing Center: Students write at least one sentence and illustrate it. The sentence must contain at least one vocabulary word from their group's vocabulary list.

Browsing Boxes: Books below, on, and above grade level are separated by group ability into five separate boxes. Using the browsing box designated for their group, students will browse through the books and determine which book they would like to buddy read into a tape recorder to practice fluency.

Listening Center: Again, using an audio book designated for their group level, students will listen and track a story. When the story is finished the students complete a worksheet in regards to the book provided which includes their ability level of vocabulary.

Overhead Center: Students write at least six of their given vocabulary words for the week and repeat them to an adult.

Game Center: Students use their given vocabulary words to make a complete sentence. If they are correct, they have the opportunity to roll a dice and move forward on a game board.

ABC Center: Students work on a specified letter sound (phoneme). They must come up with at least six words using that sound.

Computer: The students are each allowed ten minutes to work on a program working with phonics practice such as beginning and ending consonants.

Whole Group

“Radio Reading helps children focus on communicating a message so it can be understood by listeners” (Greene, 1979). There may be some miscues in the reading, but listeners respond to the reading by discussing it, restating the basic message, and evaluating how the message was delivered. Bring a radio to class and have children listen to it for a few minutes. You should preview a station to identify content that would be appropriate for your class. Before asking children to listen, tell them that they will discuss the message after listening. After listening to the radio for a minute or two, turn it off and invite children to share what was heard. Focus on the message and clarity of what was said. Relate the children’s listening to the radio to the strategy called Radio Reading. Tell children that they will have an opportunity to listen to classmates read a brief selection.

The material selected for reading should be a paragraph or two at an appropriate level of difficulty. The goal is to communicate meaning. Select an appropriate passage for a child to read. Stress that the goal is to communicate the meaning of the passage to the other children in the classroom. If a word is unknown during reading, the child should merely point to the word and ask, “What is that word?” You immediately tell the child the word so the reading can proceed with limited interruption. The other children serve as listeners, and they do not have a copy of the passage. After the passage is read, invite the children who were the listeners to discuss the message that was conveyed. The intent of this discussion is to confirm that an accurate message was sent and received. The reader is responsible for clearing up any confusion by the listeners by rereading selected portions of the passage. In some cases, misread words may cause confusion. In such cases, the listeners must raise questions about the clarity of the content presented. Remember that the basic goal in Radio Reading is to present a message clearly; moreover, it is the goal of the listeners to evaluate the clarity of the message and to help resolve any misunderstandings.

Understanding the value of diversity as well as the value of differentiated instruction, teachers will strive to broaden instruction in their differentiated classrooms so that all students can succeed and can develop to their full potential.

Rather than trying to get all students to fit a standard mold, differentiated classroom teachers tend to value different learning perspectives and have classrooms that are alive with authentic learning. Students are encouraged to participate alone, in small groups, or in whole groups. Since the activities and assessments attempt to meet each student's preferred ways of learning within their individual learning styles, students are exceedingly motivated.

Differentiated instruction is a pivotal element in any classroom. Ideally all classroom instruction should be differentiated and student specific in order to meet the needs of students. Albeit time consuming, differentiated instruction is effective and undeniably worth every effort!

References

Greene, F. (1979). Radio Reading. In C. Pennock (Ed.), Reading comprehension at four linguistic levels (pp. 104-107) Newark, DE: International Reading Association.