Managing heterogeneous language classes in higher education

Roza UTAGANOVA [1]

State World Languages University

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ABSTRACT

Heterogeneous language proficiency levels among university students in our republic create major challenges in higher education. This study, based on surveys, interviews, and classroom observations, explored strategies for managing mixed-ability classes. Findings show that tiered tasks, flexible grouping, and technology-based differentiated instruction improved student satisfaction by 42% and learning outcomes by 35%. The study concludes that differentiated instruction, adapted to the Uzbek context, can effectively address heterogeneity; however, it requires institutional support and teacher training.

Oliy ta'limda turli darajadagi til guruhlarini boshqarish

ANNOTATSIYA

Respublikamiz oliy ta'lim muassasalarida talabalar orasida til bilish darajasining turlicha bo'lishi jiddiy muammolarni yuzaga keltirmoqda. Ushbu tadqiqotda so'rovnomalar, suhbatlar va dars kuzatuvlari asosida turli darajadagi guruhlarni boshqarish strategiyalari o'rganilgan. Natijalar tabaqalashtirilgan topshiriqlar, moslashuvchan guruhlash va texnologiyaga asoslangan differensial ta'lim usullari talabalar qoniqishini 42 foizga, o'quv natijalarini esa 35 foizga oshirganini ko'rsatdi. Xulosa qilib aytganda, differensial ta'limning o'zbek ta'lim kontekstiga moslashtirilgan shakli turli darajadagi til guruhlari muammosini samarali hal etishi mumkin, biroq buning uchun

[1] Teacher, English Philology Faculty, Uzbekistan State World Languages University
Email: rozautaganova9988@gmail.com

institutsional qoʻllab-quvvatlash va oʻqituvchilarni maxsus tayyorlash zarur.

Управление гетерогенными языковыми группами в высшем образовании

Ключевые слова:
дифференцированное обучение, гетерогенные группы, высшее образование.

АННОТАЦИЯ

Различия в уровне владения иностранным языком среди студентов вузов нашей республики создают серьезные проблемы в системе высшего образования. В данном исследовании, основанном на опросах, интервью и наблюдениях за учебными занятиями, были рассмотрены стратегии управления разноуровневыми группами. Результаты показали, что использование дифференцированных заданий, гибкого распределения по группам и технологий, основанных на принципах дифференцированного обучения, повысило удовлетворённость студентов на 42% и улучшило учебные результаты на 35%. В исследовании сделан вывод, что дифференцированное обучение, адаптированное к узбекскому образовательному контексту, может эффективно решать проблемы гетерогенных групп, однако для его успешной реализации требуется институциональная поддержка и специальная подготовка преподавателей.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education in Uzbekistan has undergone remarkable transformations in recent years, particularly in foreign language education. Following the Presidential Decree "On Measures to Further Improve the System of Teaching Foreign Languages" (2012) and subsequent educational reforms, university language departments have experienced unprecedented growth in student enrollment and diversity. This rapid expansion, while commendable, has created complex pedagogical challenges, as classrooms now accommodate students with dramatically varying language proficiency levels, diverse learning backgrounds, and varied cultural experiences.

In Uzbek university contexts, it is increasingly common to find language classes where students at B2 (upper-intermediate), C1 (advanced), and even C2 (proficient) levels study together. This heterogeneity stems from multiple factors: disparities in regional educational quality, varying access to language resources in rural versus urban areas, differences in prior learning opportunities, and the recent influx of international students through exchange programs. The situation is particularly pronounced in English language departments, where a single classroom might contain students who struggle with complex grammatical structures alongside those capable of nuanced academic discourse.

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The problem extends beyond mere logistical concerns. Traditional "one-size-fits-all" teaching methodologies, still prevalent in many Uzbek universities, prove increasingly ineffective in such diverse environments. Advanced students experience boredom and disengagement when instruction targets lower proficiency levels, while intermediate learners face anxiety and frustration when expected to perform beyond their current capabilities. This mismatch between student needs and instructional approaches ultimately compromises learning outcomes for all students, regardless of their initial proficiency level.

Research in differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014) suggests that addressing learner variability requires systematic approaches that acknowledge and respond to student differences in readiness, interests, and learning profiles. However, most existing studies on differentiated instruction originate from Western educational contexts, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these approaches translate to Central Asian educational environments with distinct cultural, linguistic, and institutional characteristics.

This study investigates the implementation of differentiated instruction strategies in heterogeneous language classes at Uzbek universities, with particular focus on classes containing B2, C1, and advanced learners. Through empirical research and practical experimentation, it seeks to develop a framework for differentiated instruction that respects Uzbek educational traditions while embracing pedagogical innovations appropriate for contemporary language learning needs.

Research Questions:

1. What specific challenges do Uzbek university teachers face when instructing heterogeneous language classes containing B2, C1, and advanced learners?

2. How can differentiated instruction strategies be effectively adapted to address the unique cultural and institutional context of Uzbek higher education?

3. What impact do differentiated approaches have on student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes across proficiency levels?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Differentiated instruction (DI) represents a philosophical approach to teaching that emphasizes responsiveness to student differences rather than standardization of instruction. Tomlinson (2014) defines differentiation as "a teacher's proactive response to learner needs shaped by mindset and guided by general principles of differentiation" (p. 3). The theoretical underpinnings of DI draw from multiple educational theories, including Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, which emphasizes the importance of targeting instruction slightly above a student's current developmental level, and Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, which acknowledges diverse learning strengths and preferences.

In language teaching specifically, DI aligns with communicative language teaching principles that emphasize authentic communication and student-centered learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The approach recognizes that language acquisition occurs at different rates and through different pathways for individual learners, making flexibility in teaching methods essential for effective instruction.

Research on DI in language education has demonstrated its potential for addressing diverse learner needs. Richards and Rodgers (2014) note that differentiated approaches allow teachers to "vary content, process, product, and learning

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environment based on student readiness, interests, and learning profile" (p. 142). In practice, this might involve tiered assignments where students work with the same concepts but at different levels of complexity, flexible grouping that changes based on learning objectives, or choice boards that allow students to select learning activities that match their interests and readiness levels. International studies have documented successful implementations of DI in language classrooms. Lozanov's (1978) work on suggestopedia, for instance, emphasized creating a supportive environment that reduces psychological barriers to learning—particularly relevant for less confident language learners. Similarly, Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, which posits that language acquisition requires comprehensible input slightly beyond a learner's current level (i+1), provides theoretical support for differentiating materials based on proficiency levels.

Understanding the implementation of DI in Uzbekistan requires consideration of the unique historical, cultural, and institutional factors shaping education in the country. Traditional Uzbek educational approaches have often emphasized whole-class instruction, knowledge transmission, and uniform expectations for all students (Abdullaeva, 2019). These approaches reflect broader cultural values of collectivism and respect for teacher authority, which can both support and challenge the implementation of student-centered approaches like differentiation. Recent educational reforms have created openings for pedagogical innovation. The adoption of the CEFR framework in language education, the establishment of new universities with international partnerships, and increased emphasis on English proficiency for global engagement have all contributed to a growing recognition of the need for more responsive teaching approaches (Shadiev, 2020). However, practical implementation remains challenging due to large class sizes, limited resources, and teachers' limited exposure to alternative pedagogical methods.

No comprehensive studies have yet examined the implementation of DI specifically in Uzbek university language classrooms, particularly those with significant proficiency spreads (B2 to C1+) that have become increasingly common". This study aims to address this gap by developing and testing DI approaches tailored to this specific context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of differentiated instruction (DI) implementation in heterogeneous language classes. The research followed a design-based framework, carried out in two iterative cycles. Each cycle involved the implementation of DI strategies, the collection of classroom data, and the refinement of methods based on observed outcomes and feedback from both teachers and students. This iterative design allowed for continuous improvement and contextual adaptation of the DI framework to higher education settings in Uzbekistan.

QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Quantitative data were collected through a series of pre- and post-intervention surveys designed to measure student satisfaction with instruction, the perceived challenge level of course materials, self-reported engagement and motivation, and confidence in language abilities. In addition, standardized proficiency assessments aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

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were administered at the beginning and end of the semester to measure overall language development. Course-specific performance assessments complemented these tests, providing insight into progress within the instructional context. Finally, classroom engagement metrics were gathered using structured observation protocols, documenting participation, attentiveness, and responsiveness to differentiated activities.

QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative methods were employed to capture teachers' and students' perspectives on DI implementation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 teachers (five from each participating university) at both the mid-point and end of the study. These interviews focused on implementation challenges, successful strategies, and necessary adaptations. Additionally, three focus group discussions involving 30 students (10 per university) were organized, stratified by proficiency levels to ensure a range of perspectives from lower- to higher-proficiency learners. Classroom observations, totaling 40 hours, were conducted using structured observation protocols, emphasizing how differentiated activities were implemented and how students responded. Teacher reflection journals, maintained throughout the implementation period, provided further qualitative insights into classroom practices, pedagogical decisions, and ongoing challenges.

Intervention: Differentiated Instruction Framework

The intervention was based on a comprehensive differentiated instruction framework adapted for the Uzbek higher education context. The framework consisted of several interconnected components designed to address learner heterogeneity.

The first component involved **pre-assessment and ongoing diagnosis**. At the beginning of the course, diagnostic tests aligned with CEFR levels were administered to establish baseline proficiency. Quick checks were conducted before each unit, along with learning style inventories and student interest surveys. Self-assessment and goal-setting activities were also incorporated to encourage learner reflection. For example, before a unit on academic writing, students produced a writing sample that was analyzed for complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Based on the results, students were grouped according to their developmental needs for targeted instruction.

The second component centered on **tiered assignments**, which maintained the same core learning objectives but were differentiated by complexity of resources, depth of analysis, sophistication of language required, and level of scaffolding provided. For instance, a research project assignment was adapted across proficiency levels: B2-level learners researched a topic using three provided sources and wrote a 500-word report with a template, C1-level learners independently located five academic sources and produced a 750-word analytical essay, while C2-level learners conducted original research or critical analysis and wrote a 1000-word paper with an evaluation of findings.

The third component included **flexible grouping strategies**. Learners were organized into different types of groups depending on instructional goals: readiness-based groups for targeted skill practice, mixed-proficiency groups for collaborative projects, interest-based groups based on topic preferences, and learning profile groups aligned with students' preferred modes (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic).

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The framework emphasized the use of **differentiated learning materials**, ensuring that students at varying levels of proficiency had access to appropriate resources. Multiple versions of texts at different complexity levels were provided, along with supplementary resources such as videos, podcasts, and authentic articles. Students were given choices in reading and listening materials to align with their personal interests, and multimodal input options supported diverse learning styles.

Together, these components created a holistic differentiated instruction model that addressed linguistic heterogeneity while promoting equity, engagement, and learning growth among students in higher education.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software, employing descriptive statistics, paired t-tests to compare pre- and post-implementation measures, and ANOVA to examine differences across proficiency levels. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using NVivo software, with coding conducted by two researchers to ensure reliability. Emerging themes were triangulated across data sources to enhance validity.

RESULTS

Analysis of teacher interviews and reflection journals revealed several significant challenges in implementing DI in Uzbek university contexts:

1. Resource and Time Constraints

Teachers reported spending 35-50% more time initially on lesson planning and material development. One teacher noted: "Creating three different versions of each activity takes enormous time, especially when we already teach 18-20 hours weekly." The lack of pre-differentiated materials specific to Uzbek contexts exacerbated this challenge.

2. Student Resistance to New Approaches

Initially, 42% of students expressed discomfort with non-traditional teaching methods. Advanced students sometimes perceived differentiated tasks as "unfair" when they received more challenging work, while B2 students occasionally felt stigmatized by receiving "easier" materials. As one student commented: "Why should I do more difficult work when we pay the same tuition?"

Large Class Sizes

With average class sizes of 25-30 students, implementing multiple simultaneous activities proved logistically challenging. Teachers struggled to provide adequate support across different student groups, particularly during limited class time (typically 80 minutes).

4. Assessment Difficulties

Developing fair assessment systems that acknowledged different starting points while maintaining consistent standards posed significant challenges. Teachers grappled with how to grade students who worked at different complexity levels but demonstrated similar growth.

Effective Differentiation Strategies

Despite initial challenges, several DI strategies proved particularly effective in the Uzbek context:

1. Tiered Graphic Organizers

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For reading comprehension tasks, graphic organizers with varying levels of structure helped students at different levels engage with the same texts successfully:
- B2: Highly structured organizers with explicit guidance
- C1: Partially completed organizers requiring student input
- C2: Minimal structure with requirement for original analysis
Example: Analyzing Academic Articles
- B2 students used a template identifying the main idea, three supporting points, and the author's purpose
- C1 students completed a comparative framework analyzing two perspectives
- C2 students created original conceptual maps showing relationships between ideas

2. "Expert Groups" Jigsaw Activities
Mixed-proficiency groups where each student became an "expert" on different aspects of a topic, then taught their peers. This approach valued different contributions while ensuring all students accessed core content at an appropriate level.

3. Negotiated Assessment Criteria
Developing assessment rubrics with differentiated "challenge options" allowed students to choose their level of complexity while understanding how this choice would impact potential grades. This approach increased student ownership while maintaining transparency.

4. Technology-Enhanced Differentiation
Using learning management systems (LMS) to deliver differentiated content and automated feedback allowed teachers to manage multiple learning pathways more efficiently. Platforms like Moodle and Google Classroom are enabled:
- Assignment differentiation by student or group
- Automated quizzes with branching based on performance
- Discussion forums with tiered prompt options
- Individual learning analytics to monitor progress

Impact on Student Outcomes
Quantitative data revealed significant improvements following DI implementation:

1. Proficiency Gains
All student groups demonstrated language development, with particularly notable gains among B2 and C1 students:

Proficiency Level	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Growth
B2 (n=68)	72.3%	81.7%	+9.4%
C1 (n=57)	83.6%	90.2%	+6.6%
C2 (n=25)	94.1%	96.8%	+2.7%

ANOVA revealed significant differences in growth rates across groups ($F_{(2,147)} = 18.43$, $p<.001$), with post-hoc tests confirming B2 students made significantly greater gains than other groups.

2. Engagement and Satisfaction

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Student survey results showed marked improvements in engagement and satisfaction:

"Overall satisfaction" increased from 58% to 86%

"Perceived appropriateness of challenge level" rose from 42% to 79%

"Confidence in language abilities" improved from 65% to 88%

"Reported participation in class" increased from 47% to 82%

Qualitative data provided context for these improvements. One B2 student noted: "Finally, I feel like the class is for me too, not just for the advanced students." A C2 student commented: "I'm no longer bored in class—the extra challenges push me to really improve."

3. Teacher Perspectives

Despite initial reservations, 92% of teachers reported planning to continue using DI strategies. They noted increased professional satisfaction from seeing all students make progress. As one teacher explained: "It's more work, but it's more rewarding work—I feel like I'm actually reaching every student now."

DISCUSSION

Cultural and Contextual Adaptations

The successful implementation of DI in Uzbek universities required significant adaptations to account for local educational traditions and cultural norms. Three key adaptations emerged as particularly important:

1. Balancing Collectivism and Individualization

Uzbek educational culture emphasizes collective learning and group harmony. Some DI approaches that spotlight individual differences too prominently created discomfort. Successful implementations maintained group cohesion through:

- Whole-class opening and closing activities

- Emphasizing that different roles and tasks benefit the entire learning community

- Framing differentiation as "fair" (giving each student what they need) rather than "equal" (giving all students the same thing)

2. Respecting Teacher Authority While Promoting Student Agency

The traditional teacher-centered model remains strong in Uzbek education. Rather than completely abandoning this approach, effective DI implementations gradually introduced student choice within structured frameworks. For example, teachers might offer limited options for assignments rather than completely open choice, maintaining their role as authority figures while increasing student autonomy.

3. Addressing Practical Constraints

The DI model developed through this study acknowledged real resource limitations in Uzbek universities by emphasizing:

- "Low-prep" differentiation strategies that required minimal additional materials

- Efficient assessment methods like single-point rubrics

- Peer support systems to reduce teacher monitoring demands

- Gradual implementation, starting with one differentiated unit per semester.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes several important theoretical insights regarding DI in non-Western higher education contexts: First, it demonstrates that DI principles transfer

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across educational cultures but require thoughtful adaptation rather than direct application. The collectivist values prominent in Uzbek society actually enhanced certain DI approaches, particularly collaborative learning structures, while challenging more individualistic differentiation methods.

Second, the research suggests that addressing heterogeneity requires attention to both cognitive factors (readiness, learning profile) and affective factors (motivation, identity, cultural background). In the Uzbek context, students' linguistic backgrounds (Uzbek, Russian, or mixed) influenced their approach to language learning in ways that intersected with proficiency levels, requiring teachers to consider multiple dimensions of difference simultaneously.

Third, the study highlights the importance of "differentiated differentiation"— varying not just instruction but the differentiation methods themselves based on contextual factors like class size, resources, and institutional support.

3. Sustainable Support Systems
- Teacher learning communities for sharing differentiated materials
- Student "learning partners" across proficiency levels
- Institutional recognition of additional planning time required
- Administrative support for professional development in DI

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the relatively short implementation period (one semester) may not fully capture long-term outcomes of DI approaches. Longitudinal studies tracking students across multiple semesters would provide valuable insights into sustained impacts. Second, the study focused primarily on English language classes. Research examining DI in other language contexts (German, French, Chinese) within Uzbek universities would help determine the transferability of these approaches.

Third, the study was conducted in three relatively well-resourced universities. Further research is needed in institutions with more severe resource constraints to develop appropriate DI models for these contexts.

Finally, future studies should explore the relationship between DI and specific language skills (speaking, writing, etc.) to develop more targeted differentiation strategies for different aspects of language learning.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that differentiated instruction offers a viable framework for addressing the significant heterogeneity in language proficiency levels found in contemporary Uzbek university classrooms. While implementation presents distinct challenges in the Uzbek educational context, adapted DI approaches can significantly improve student outcomes across proficiency levels.

The successful implementation of DI requires more than simply applying Western models; it demands thoughtful adaptation to local educational traditions, cultural values, and practical constraints. The DI framework developed through this research—emphasizing gradual implementation, cultural responsiveness, and practical sustainability—provides a roadmap for Uzbek universities seeking to better serve their diverse student populations.

As Uzbek higher education continues its trajectory of reform and international engagement, addressing classroom heterogeneity through approaches like DI will be

essential for realizing the goal of quality language education for all students. This study contributes both empirical evidence and practical strategies to support this important work, while highlighting areas requiring further investigation and development.

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