

## Student Heterogeneity and Differentiation: Professional Challenges for Teachers of Foreign Languages

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### Abstract

Student heterogeneity in (foreign language) instruction is a problem and a major professional challenge in both theory and practice. This problem/challenge will be discussed in the contribution as a paradox of pedagogical and didactic work from its beginnings onwards. This is followed by a reflection on the institutional and structural frameworks for differentiation as a conceptual option for appropriate treatment of student heterogeneity. The empirical part, stimulated by the students' statements during a didactics seminar, presents the results of a qualitative analysis of statements by foreign language teachers about differentiation, possibilities of differentiation, dilemmas, and pitfalls. Finally, suggestions are presented through which differentiation could find its way from theory to practice.

**Key words:** *heterogeneity, homogeneity, differentiation, foreign language teaching and learning.*

### Introduction

From the beginning of public schooling, student heterogeneity has been a central problem of teaching (Tillman, 2008: 33). Consequently, heterogeneity and differentiation are concepts that have been at the forefront of pedagogical and didactic discussions since reform pedagogy. Current events in the world,

globalisation and migration processes have further intensified these discussions on heterogeneity and differentiation.

Students are individuals with specific characteristics, qualities, predispositions, goals, and motivations. Anthropologically and socioculturally, students' individuality is expressed through their various assumptions, talents, inclinations, interests, attitudes, habits, and conditions in the environment from which they come. In addition to these differences, Stern adds differences in social competences, traditions, value patterns, source languages, and students' physical and mental characteristics (2005, 7-8). In a class where there is usually a large number of students, these specifics merge into a whole that is in principle homogeneous only with respect to age. Other types of heterogeneity are formally respected and recorded, but for the sake of easier lesson planning, these are reduced to a fictitious student, whose potential and heterogeneity become average or "of average value". It is a tradition and practice in most public education systems that some students are bored with lessons focused "on the average", while others are unable to follow, and only a few can occasionally work according to their predispositions. Especially in the light of current events in the world, it seems that the homogeneous treatment of heterogeneous students no longer works, that the dissatisfaction of both students and teachers is great and that the results of the work are no longer sufficient. Traditional pedagogical-didactic approaches should long ago have been replaced by new didactic procedures that would change and reform the traditional culture of learning and teaching.

At the beginning, the contribution will discuss the paradox of the concept of pedagogical and didactic work from its beginnings. This is followed by a reflection on the institutional and structural frameworks for differentiation as a conceptual option and an opportunity for appropriate treatment of student heterogeneity. The empirical part, stimulated by the students' statements during the didactics seminar, presents the results of a qualitative analysis of statements by foreign language teachers about differentiation, the possibilities of differentiation, dilemmas, and pitfalls. Finally, suggestions are presented through which differentiation could find its way from theory to practice.

### **Differentiation – a paradox within the concept of pedagogical and didactic work**

Proper treatment and development of heterogeneity in the classroom are theoretically easy to realise by differentiation. In a school context, it means all the

organisational, formal, informal, pedagogical, didactic and personal efforts of the teacher to properly address, encourage and develop the distinct, heterogeneous predispositions of students in the classroom. Differentiation is thus a concept representing a type of instruction as well as the organisation of instruction and didactic-methodological procedures that give meaning to the different treatment of students in the process of education, as stated by Riedl (2008: 122), or as Hoffmann puts it, differentiation is both “a side effect and a consequence” (2013: 160).

Differentiated instruction is the subject of many theoretical and professional discussions, and from a theoretical point of view, we seem to be wondering only how it will take place; whether we need it is no longer a relevant question. However, in practice it seems “normal” that teaching procedures and methods remain “homogeneous”, i.e., aimed at the average student (cf. Wischer 2008, Gogolin 2010, Königs 2017). Hoffmann also notes that differentiation is “publicly postulated, but we secretly prefer to avoid it” (2013: 122), even though students are and remain heterogeneous (cf. Stern 2005). To understand differentiation as a “double-edged phenomenon for institutionalised learning” (Hoffmann 2013: 160), we need to go far back in the history of pedagogy. J.A. Comenius (1592-1670) in his work *Didactica magna* propagated frontal instruction in (larger) groups as effective and economical, because it was supposed to allow everyone to learn everything thoroughly. In this way he also opened a central dilemma: learning in a group is basically effective, and the progress of an individual and their learning can be very encouraging and beneficial to the group. While individual students can make a significant contribution to progress in the knowledge among the whole group, certain students can greatly hinder the progress, learning and work of the group and make it exceedingly difficult. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Weinert wrote that the direct transfer of the concept of differentiation into the existing paradigm of education was a central and unsolvable problem of every democracy and every pedagogy. On the one hand, we have principled and constitutionally justified equality of people and, on the other hand, we have their factual inequality in physiological, intellectual, educational, and social terms (Weinert 1975: 35). This ambiguity of the concept of differentiation has remained to this day and, in our opinion, is the main reason differentiated instruction is poorly implemented, if at all, in practice. In differentiation, two basically opposed concepts collide (Schütze et al. 1996: 333, Wischer 2008). The first problem is an attempt to connect the concepts of *encouragement and selection*. The basic goal and task of teachers is to organise lessons so that students can optimally develop their potential. In contrast to this, the mandate of teachers, acquired through their qualification in our society, is to treat all students and measure their achievements by the same criteria

according to the principle of *formal equality*. Another problem is that we have both *individual* and *collective criteria* for objectives. Optimal encouragement and development of an individual student's potential compete with the goals relevant to a group of students. To ensure equal opportunity for all, these differences must thus be reduced to a level that allows learning in a group. Without truncating one aspect or another, we cannot implement differentiation in the classroom; therefore, differentiation is a double-edged concept. Even though the authors have been pointing out the problem or paradox behind the concept of differentiation for decades, no major changes have yet taken place. We need to develop models that could bring equality and inequality into equilibrium within the pedagogical context (cf. Scheunpflug 2008). All the above is further complicated by the existing institutional and organisational frameworks of instruction.

All the above conceptual, institutional and structural paradoxes are the reason why student heterogeneity in the classroom is in principle homogenised. Based on these theoretical starting points, we can more easily understand the more or less successful, sporadic attempts of teachers to change the given situation and develop and encourage heterogeneous starting points for their students.

### **Differentiation – theoretical starting points**

Didactic procedures and methods for differentiated instruction have been known in the professional literature for many years (cf. e.g., Bönsch 1970, Weinert 1975, Scholz 2010). One such traditional classification distinguishes between external and internal differentiation. The difference between the two is great: external differentiation means institutional differentiation or the formal division of students with heterogeneous starting points, but of comparable age, into more homogeneous groups, and is set by educational-political social norms. Internal differentiation, on the other hand, is a syntagma for flexible and dynamic instruction, with all the didactic procedures and measures introduced by the teacher into the lessons to optimally stimulate the individual potential of a heterogeneous class. The difference from traditional instruction is that different learning activities take place in the classroom at the same time and that class work takes place simultaneously in different social forms.

The internal differentiation which is at the forefront of the reflections in this article is divided by type into quantitative and qualitative types (cf. Eisenmann 2016: 361). The paradox of differentiation, however, is reflected not only on a conceptual level but also on a practical level. Didactic procedures for work differentia-

tion have their advantages and disadvantages. Undoubtedly, it is incredibly positive and encouraging that the unique potential of individual students be maximally and optimally encouraged and developed in differentiated instruction; that the instruction be student-centred and that a student in such organised instruction be significantly more (co)responsible for planning the learning process, its implementation and study outcomes. Both students who are weaker and students who are stronger in learning benefit from differentiated instruction. Further advantages of differentiated instruction include the long-term important evaluation and self-evaluation competences developed by the students.

Beyond the positive side to differentiation, there are several important negative effects. Consistent implementation of qualitative and/or quantitative internal differentiation means extreme pressure and stress for the teacher. Despite the differentiation, the teacher must adhere to the general curriculum and implement the set goals. To perform differentiated work, the teacher must prepare individual curricula for students, organise differentiated work in classes with a large number of students, adapt to the school rhythm of 45 minutes or occasionally 90 minutes of work, meet the important requirements of external actors in the educational process, i.e., parents, etc. It is also problematic for differentiated instruction that in order to consistently introduce differentiation, to accustom students to different work and to train in the implementation of differentiated work, teachers need considerable time, patience, will and perseverance, since differentiation never succeeds in a day. Furthermore, it is necessary to assess the initial knowledge of students at the beginning of the learning process, and teachers are mostly unskilled in methods and procedures for assessing knowledge. Finally, it should be mentioned that in differentiated instruction, certain students, especially weaker students, will experience feelings of discrimination and isolation and that there is a possibility of even greater divergence in knowledge and stigmatisation.

## **Empirical research**

### **Research questions**

This article seeks to show the understanding of and thinking about differentiation among the participants in the empirical research, i.e., foreign language teachers. The research was stimulated by a discussion at a seminar where students, i.e., future foreign language teachers, stated that they had mostly received a “special kind” of differentiation when they were students who were more successful in learning a foreign language: Be quiet, you know that.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:  
What do foreign language teachers think about differentiation?  
What procedures do foreign language teachers use within existing frameworks?  
According to foreign language teachers, what are the advantages and disadvantages of differentiation?

## **Research method**

The empirical part was carried out according to the descriptive method. The corpus of texts was analysed qualitatively, focusing on content; the authors defined categories, subcategories and concepts and documented these with illustrative statements. Because a limited corpus was included in the study, the results cannot be generalised, but are illustrative and exemplary.

## **Data collection procedure and sample**

The author collected data by asking more than 50 foreign language teachers by e-mail to write down their views on differentiation, justify them, describe differentiation procedures, advantages and disadvantages, along with their concerns, and to upload the answers into the cloud within 14 days of receiving the e-mail. In this way, anonymity was ensured.

## **Data analysis and interpretation**

### **Participating teachers**

Eleven teacher statements were considered in the analysis. Among these, there were 6 female teachers and 1 male teacher from primary schools and 4 female teachers working in secondary school. Their views do not differ significantly according to the profile of the school. However, there is an interesting and obvious difference between the genders. The attitude of the sole male teacher towards differentiation in the research is markedly negative. His brief justification is self-confident, but it does not hold up either from the point of view of the profession or from the point of view of practice. The teacher's position may be understood as an initiative for more detailed analysis of teacher attitudes towards differentiation from a gender perspective.

Qualitative analysis of parts of the teachers' statements.

**Table 1.** Categories and concepts, along with teachers' word-for-word statements

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts	Sample statements
A: THE CONCEPT OF DIFFERENTIATION	Heterogeneity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- knowledge</li> <li>- abilities</li> <li>- interests</li> <li>- linguistic talent</li> <li>- incentives from environment</li> <li>- compromise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Students are very different in knowledge, abilities, interests."</li> <li>- "Due to differences, in some cases due to greater talent for language, also differences in exposure to language, contact with it, possibilities of additional use."</li> <li>- "Adapting my [teacher's] expectations from children in accordance with theirs."</li> </ul>
	Necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- need</li> <li>- foundation</li> <li>- engagement</li> <li>- theoretical construct</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "It is (absolutely) necessary."</li> <li>- "It makes sense."</li> <li>- "It is strenuous."</li> <li>- "It is an ideal that is difficult to achieve in practice."</li> </ul>
B: THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENTIATION	Unnecessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- conscious rejection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Simply, I do not implement differentiation because I have no guidelines anywhere, and I do not intend to deal with it myself."</li> </ul>
	Quantitative differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- various activities</li> <li>- limiting the scope of the learning material</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "I limit the amount of material for oral assessment of knowledge for weak students. I provide them with extended time for checking and assessing knowledge."</li> </ul>
C: TYPES OF DIFFERENTIATION	Qualitative differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- additional, more difficult tasks</li> <li>- work in homogeneous or heterogeneous groups according to knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "I demand more from students who are doing better."</li> <li>- "With additional activities outside of class..."</li> <li>- "I ,solve it' by working in [different] groups."</li> </ul>
	Combined differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- heterogeneous groups according to knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "I try to make the activities different in terms of quality, form of work and goals... All have certain common goals, and each individual has individual ones."</li> </ul>
	Advantages of differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- criticality</li> <li>- productivity</li> <li>- integration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Develops critical judgement in students because it encourages peer networking and peer support, because students feel „a freedom of choice „, [...]; in differentiation the productivity of their creation is often surprisingly higher";</li> </ul>
D: EVALUATION OF DIFFERENTIATION	Disadvantages of differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- burdened teacher</li> <li>- the virtue of "waiting"</li> <li>- diagnostics</li> <li>- monitoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Compromises are often needed that take into account both the child's personality and my [teacher's] busy schedule."</li> <li>- "Does it make sense? .... I believe that the ability to "wait" is an especially useful and welcome virtue in today's world."</li> <li>- "In practice, it is difficult at the beginning to identify students' learning needs, goals, and the "monitoring" also takes a lot of time."</li> </ul>

In Category A, statements are collected showing that teachers know what differentiation is and that they know the concept, but they understand heterogeneity, which they directly associate with differentiation, differently. While some of them stress only *knowledge and abilities* in heterogeneity, others add *interests*, and some believe that differences are due to *special talent of students for languages*. One of the statements also highlights the difference in *environmental influence, exposure to language, varying intensity of contact with language* and varying *opportunities* for practical use of language by students. All the above cases, however, are only specific forms of heterogeneity that are directly reflected in foreign language instruction. According to the theory, students differ in several other factors that also affect the learning process, but only indirectly. Emotions, physical condition, multilingualism, the degree of stimulation available in the environment from which they come, material opportunities for work, etc. are important aspects of heterogeneity that are not mentioned in the collected statements of teachers (cf. Stern 2005). Also worth mentioning is the idea of differentiation on two levels, which is quite frequent in practice. The *adaptation* mentioned in the statement often results in the teacher merely devoting himself/herself to weak students and “giving work” to more successful students, or training the more successful students to “wait”. This waiting means, as follows from one of the statements (cf. Category D), training in one of today’s important virtues. Another important aspect that can be discussed in Category A is differentiation as a compromise between the *teacher’s and the child’s requirements/ expectations*. The teacher’s requirements are expected to relate to the goals and consequently to the content, methods and forms of work on which the teacher decides, and to the wishes, needs and interests of children and, indirectly, parents. The student’s requirements, however, probably mean the students’ willingness to work, their curiosity, motivation, will, etc. A better solution, in my opinion, that could lead out of this dilemma, is the high professionalism of the teacher, their pedagogical and didactic skills, flexibility and commitment.

Most statements in *Category B* confirm the theoretical starting points on the necessity of differentiation. Only a limited number of teachers were willing to participate in the research, and not all of them agree that differentiation is necessary. We assume that the teachers who implement differentiation, who are familiar with it and who can write about this topic, constitute our respondents. Furthermore, most of the teachers involved in the study are aware that differentiation is sensible and is not a priori rejected, even though *it is strenuous and difficult to achieve in practice*. The exception is the above-mentioned statement from the teacher who states that he does not implement differentiation, and that he needs conceptual, didactic and systemic guidelines, while he himself firmly rejects any engagement



in this field. The most interesting phenomenon is that, despite the above, he admits that his students, heterogeneous by age, listen to the same lessons every year or three years in a row: *Although e.g., a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student is listening to some of the same content for the third year in a row.* We can only speculate that this “same content” might be presented by identical methods and didactic approaches, that students would not be very motivated to work and that learning a foreign language in such circumstances would mostly be doomed to failure.

Statements in *Category C* summarise how the work of teachers involved in the study is differentiated. As expected, most statements indicate that class work is differentiated according to the scope of tasks. Differentiation, therefore, means extra work for successful students, and from the students’ point of view, this is often understood as a punishment. They are usually not particularly motivated by this form of differentiation, so teachers only need to introduce it occasionally. Determining a limited scope of content for examination, extending the time for written examination, or adapting the types of examination for certain students are also undoubtedly possible methods of differentiation. However, because it obviously means a different kind of work and separate conditions for working, such differentiation can turn into stigmatisation and therefore requires careful consideration by the teacher and knowledge of all the circumstances of the work. As is clear from these statements, certain teachers also implement qualitative differentiation. This is especially true for those who systematically differentiate work, from goal planning to the learning process and testing, and actively involve students in this process. Furthermore, some teachers implement different classroom work at the same time, either at different levels of difficulty, or in different social forms, or with the support of distinct media, etc. There is another type of differentiation recorded in the statements, the combined type of differentiation. This is a combination of external and qualitative differentiation, where the teacher in additional activities, outside the framework of the lesson, pays additional attention to more successful students.

In category D only one statement offers arguments that speak in favour of differentiated instruction. The listed competences that students can develop in differentiated instruction are thus development of critical thinking, collaborative work and help, greater work productivity and a sense of “freedom of choice”. The latter is important for developing responsibility and individual responsibility for work. In all other statements, however, there were no arguments for or against differentiation; some concerns were raised, dilemmas that arise for teachers when introducing differentiation or thinking about differentiated classroom work. The issues most frequently mentioned are teacher workload, overload within the given

framework of traditional teaching and learning, lack of time to prepare materials, and especially the inability of teachers to diagnose heterogeneous starting points of students, monitoring work at different levels and checking and assessment of knowledge. The traditional and summative assessment, which is mandatory in most schools, hinders all attempts and efforts by teachers to implement systematically differentiated work and learning. In addition to the above, one of the statements, showing the traditional learning and teaching culture, confirms the expected homogeneous work in the classroom from both the teachers' and students' points of view, since students, otherwise accustomed to traditionally undifferentiated work, *are confused, have no overview of the knowledge acquired, the acquired knowledge is not structured, etc.*, when differentiated instruction is implemented.

## **Conclusion**

The diversity and heterogeneity of students in classrooms are a given, or as stated by Tillman (2008), the central problem; differentiation is the concept that offers methods and procedures by which the teacher can respond to it, i.e., to the diversity, the individual predispositions of their class. Theoretically, differentiation has been widely discussed, but precise procedures for differentiating work and ensuring the development of e.g., 30 individual students and their potential in the classroom, have not yet been provided. Differentiation is basically a paradoxical concept, since it tries to connect what cannot be connected: the equality of people under the constitution and laws and their factual inequality or uniqueness in real life. In school, this means that teachers try to encourage students, while simultaneously selecting them through assessment procedures; although they set individual goals for students, teachers cannot avoid general, curricular goals. Given these factors, differentiation is publicly postulated, but in practice it is carried out only occasionally or not at all. This is further confirmed by the statements of teachers in which they report their thoughts about the advantages and disadvantages of differentiation and see mainly the negative sides of differentiation (teacher workload, time, and number of students in the class). This can also be explained by the fact that differentiated work mostly means additional work for teachers, and more tasks for the better students, i.e., quantitative differentiation. Furthermore, additional work means extra time needed for the teacher to prepare the materials and often a punishment for the student. The discomfort of both actors is thus predetermined. The results of the research also showed that these foreign language

teachers reduce the concept of heterogeneity only to certain types of heterogeneity, namely to those that are directly reflected in foreign language instruction. We can assume that this is another consequence of the fact that the diagnostic competences of teachers are limited to their profession and that they did not deal with this question during their studies and subsequent professional development. The development of diagnostic competence among (foreign language) teachers is one of the important steps on the way to a successful response to student heterogeneity.

In addition to these diagnostics, it would be necessary to significantly emphasise and implement problem-based learning and enforce formative monitoring and assessment (Tłuściak-Deliowska, Czyżewska 2019). If these concepts are consistently implemented, from the planning phase to the implementation and (self) evaluation of learning, differentiation can occur without encouraging or explicitly planning it.

Changes in the world, migrations and, above all, the “new reality” (COVID-19) have led us to rapid, unplanned and radical changes to traditional work and learning: different forms of work, a mix of in-person and virtual learning, group and individual work. The opportunity should be seized, and these concepts, the effectiveness of which is still often called into question, should be further developed. In addition to the above, the “new reality of differentiated work” also requires mature, flexible and motivated students who are willing to take responsibility for work and for the results of work. The culture of learning and teaching has changed and faltered in the current situation, but long-term changes will take considerable time.

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