

Original research article

# The Use of Differentiated Instruction in LSP Courses in Moroccan Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Differentiated instruction is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of instructional strategies addressing diverse learners' needs. Equally, LSP pedagogy is predicated on the identification and acknowledgement of learners' needs. Both approaches incorporate pedagogical practices derived from the principles of learner-centred teaching. The integration of differentiated instruction practices into LSP pedagogy can potentially result in more effective learning and learner satisfaction. This study sought to survey LSP instructors' views and perceptions about the use of differentiated instruction in higher education. Data was collected using a questionnaire with closed-ended questions. Participants included twenty LSP instructors teaching English and French at a large polytechnic university in Morocco. The majority of the participants placed a high value on the use of differentiated instruction in LSP courses. A number of implementation barriers were identified. Although differentiated instruction is considered to be an effective instructional approach, institutional constraints may hinder its potential benefits.

**Keywords:** differentiated instruction, pedagogy, LSP, higher education, learner-centeredness, needs analysis

## 1. Introduction

Research-based practices enhance teaching and learning effectiveness. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) urged educators to “look for practices grounded in scholarship”. They maintained that “our profession, like all other professions, strengthens as we engage in the cycle of examining practice, developing theory, and systematically investigating both theory and practice” (p. 173). In reference to primary and secondary education, Tomlinson (2017) noted that teaching and learning have been more unitary than differentiated. High-quality instruction is deemed to be one of the most important ingredients contributing to learner achievement. “High-quality teaching entails providing students with prompt, informative feedback and is directed by analyses of achievement results often leading to the provision of differentiated instruction” (Leithwood et al., 2017). In tertiary education, instruction is arguably not optimally designed to foster effective learning strategies. University instructors still draw heavily upon traditional practices (Pilner & Johnson, 2004). This by no means implies that the instructional approach is the only culprit. Several factors are at play in determining the success or failure of university students. Some of these factors are listed below.

1. Academic skills (Mull, Skitlington, & Alper, 2001)
2. Self-regulatory strategies (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ruban & Reis, 2006)
3. Difficulties in areas such as reading, writing, mathematics, memory, time management, and organization affect learner achievement (Allsopp, Minskiff, & Bolt, 2005; Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997; Wirt et al., 2004)
4. Level of engagement is affected by students' previous education experiences (Kuh, 2007)
5. Instructors' beliefs about the process of a student-centered, learning-oriented epistemology promote learning teaching and learning. A teacher-centered, transmission-

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oriented epistemology inhibits learning (Kember, 2001; Norton et al., 2005; Samuellowicz & Bain, 2001; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999)

6. Interactive and collaborative activities that are aligned with students' interests, beliefs and backgrounds promote efficacy (Putnam & Burko, 2000).

Differentiated instruction has been proposed as a viable alternative to the dominant teaching-based model currently in use in many universities across the globe (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009). "While differentiated learning is emphasized in K-12 classrooms, less attention is given to differentiation at the university level." (Hartshorne et al., 2012). Guided by research in cognitive psychology (Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008), differentiated learning was initially designed to accommodate the needs of students in special and gifted education (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; McClesky & Waldron, 1998). Differentiated instruction is a multidisciplinary construct and its exponents "draw on a wide research of theories and research to provide validation" (Wood & Blanton, 2012, p. 148).

Second language acquisition (SLA) has been extensively researched and yielded insightful findings. One of the fundamental goals of SLA research is to facilitate and expedite the SLA process, and appropriate instruction will undeniably make a contribution (Freeman-Larsen & Long, 2016). There is little research examining the effects of differentiated instruction practices on instructed SLA. This may be the case because differentiated instruction is regarded as "a way of thinking about teaching and learning that can be translated into classroom practices in many ways" (Blaz, 2016, p.5).

Since the early 1960s, language for specific purposes (LSP) has become one of the most important areas of teaching in universities around the world. It began as a peripheralized mode of instruction that emphasized the teaching of specialized vocabulary to students in vocational schools. Today, "LSP plays a critical role globally, evidenced by the massive growth of higher education institutions offering English-medium instruction" (Raitskaya, 2018, p.1). Given the nature of LSP, it seems evident that the integration of differentiated instruction practices into LSP courses would lead to better learning outcomes.

In an independent survey commissioned by the British Council, 1200 respondents ranging in age from 15 to 25 expressed their approval and enthusiasm for the Moroccan government's decision to shift to English as the primary foreign language both in secondary and higher education. (British Council Morocco, n.d.). As English has acquired a higher social and educational status, the need for sound pedagogical practices cannot be overestimated. The present study aims to fill a gap in the extant literature in the area of LSP pedagogy by examining LSP instructors' perceptions of the use of differentiated instruction in LSP courses. Four research questions guided this study:

1. How do LSP instructors in higher education define differentiated instruction?
2. How often do language instructors use instructional strategies?
3. To what extent is differentiated instruction relevant in LSP programs?
4. What are the benefits and challenges in planning and implementing differentiated instruction?

## 2. Materials and Methods

The questions used in the questionnaire were developed based on the work of Turner, Solis and Kinade, (2017). To answer the questions, the participants had to choose one or more answers from a list of four answers (see Appendix A). The study targeted language instructors teaching English and French (dominant languages in Morocco) in tertiary education. The questionnaire included four sections: demographic information (age, gender, teaching experience, language of instruction), types of taught LSP courses and eight multiple-choice questions. The purpose of the study was also included at the top of the survey. The survey questions were designed to elicit information for exploring the research questions.

Quantitative data were collected by means of an online survey created through Google Forms. Convenience sampling was used to collect specific information about the target population. The survey was emailed to twenty-five participants working as language instructors at Mohamed VI Polytechnic University. UM6P is a Moroccan non-profit private research university. The survey response rate was very high (80%).

The participants included 18 males (90%) and 2 females (10%). Fifteen taught English, and four taught French. The age of the participants range from 35 to 55 years old (see Table 1). Over Three-quarters of the participants have more than fifteen years of teaching

experience (see Table 2). Language for academic and general purposes top the list of the LSP courses taught by the participants. Language for business and engineering are also frequently taught courses (see Table 3).

**Table 1. Research Questions (RQ) and Perception Survey Questions (Q)**

Research questions	Topical concept	Survey questions
RQ1	Definitional angle	Q5
RQ2	Use of differentiated instructional strategies in LSP contexts	Q6 Q8
RQ3	Relevance of differentiated instruction in LSP contexts	Q7 Q9 Q10
RQ4	Benefits and challenges of using differentiated instruction in LSP	Q11 Q12

**Table 2. Participants' Definition of Differentiated Instruction (n= 20)**

	Definitional angle	Number of endorsements	Percentage of Endorsements
Benjamin, 2002	Instructional method	6	30%
Tomlinson, 2001	Planning	6	30%
Chapman & King, 2003	Philosophy	7	35%
Walpole & McKenna	Assessment	1	5%

**Table 3. Frequency of use of Instructional Strategies in LSP Programs (n=20)**

Response	n	Percentage
I do not use differentiated practices	1	5%
I use differentiated practices sporadically	8	40%
I use differentiated practices on a regular basis.	11	55%

### 3. Results

One-third of the participants chose the definition proposed by Benjamin (2002), which describes differentiated instruction as an instructional method. The other third selected Tomlinson's (2001) definition, which stresses the importance of planning. The definition put forward by Chapman and King (2013) was chosen by the 35% of the participants. Only one participant opted for assessment as a key defining feature of differentiated instruction (see table 2).

Over half of the participants reported they use differentiated practices on a regular basis and two-fifths use differentiated practices sporadically. Only one participant never uses differentiated practices (see table 3).

With regard to the importance of this instructional model, 55% of the participants regard using differentiated instruction as extremely important. 40% of the participants see differentiated practices as somewhat important (see table 4).

The majority of the participants were familiar with differentiated instruction. 60% through workshops and conferences, 25% read some literature, and 15% received no training whatsoever (See table 5). The overwhelming majority of participants view differentiated instruction as both practical and reasonable (see table 7). A little over three-quarters of the participants regarded differentiated instruction as significant and worthy of the effort required to implement (see table 7). Over half of the participants believed that class size and lack of training present a challenge to the implementation of differentiated instruction. Less than a third of the participants viewed the lack of resources as another challenge. A quarter of the participants attribute the challenge of implementation to a lack of instructional time (see table 8).

**Table 4. Opinion about using differentiated instruction in LSP programs (n=20)**

Response	n	Percentage
Not effective	1	5%
Somewhat important	8	40%
Extremely important	11	55%

**Table 5. Type of training in differentiated instruction (n=20)**

Response	n	Percentage
none	3	13%
Read some literature	5	25%
Attended a workshop and/or conference	7	35%
Attended several workshops and/or conference	5	25%

**Table 6. Relevance of differentiated instruction in LSP programs (n=20)**

Response	n	Percentage
Impractical but reasonable	1	5%
Practical but unreasonable	1	5%
Practical and reasonable	18	90%

**Table 7. Benefits of using differentiated instruction in LSP courses**

Response	n	Percentage
Insignificant but somewhat worthy of the effort	1	5%
Significant but not worthy of the effort	3	15%
Significant and worthy of the effort	16	80%

**Table 8. Challenges of implementation (n=20)**

Response	n	Percentage
Class size	12	60%
Lack of instructional time	5	25%
Lack of resources	7	35%
Lack of training	12	60%

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Definition of differentiation instruction

Instructors participating in the study have different perspectives about the essential elements of differentiated instruction. 30% of the participants identified differentiation as an instructional method. 30% emphasized planning in the differentiation process. 35% conceptualized differentiated instruction as a philosophy. It is apparent that the participants have different perspectives about what constitutes differentiated instruction.

Grouping of students is based on individual strengths and needs determined by teacher-administered assessments. Assessment is the starting point of the differentiation process. It is worth noting that only one participant identified assessment as an essential element in differentiated instruction. The participants' differing views of differentiated instruction is reflected in the extant literature. This definitional variation or disparity "can potentially lead to lack of clarity in both research and practice" (Wood & Blanton, 2012). Wood and Blanton (2012) attributed this conceptual imprecision to "how individual differences are categorized and what is necessary for differentiation to occur" (p.146). Wood and Blanton (2012) proposed a definition that merged the key concepts from the field: "Differentiated instruction is a concept that embodies both a philosophy of addressing individual needs of students in heterogeneous classrooms and the instructional approaches embedded within and supportive of that philosophy" (p. 146).

### 4.2. Frequency and effectiveness of strategy use in LSP programs

Over 50% of the instructors participating in this study reported they used differentiated strategies on a regular basis. Two-fifths reported they used differentiated strategies sporadically. The high frequency of strategy use can be explained by the instructor's beliefs about the effectiveness of the instructional model. Over 90% of the participants recognized the importance of differentiated instruction in their classroom practices. Tomlinson et al. (2003) noted that for differentiated instruction to occur, "teachers may need to change both "beliefs about the nature of schooling and their resulting classroom practice" (p. 177).

The high percentages in favor of differentiated practices may also be attributed to the nature of the content area. Language instruction is a dynamic research area, and many

publications tackled issues related to teaching approaches and methods. In addition, the instructors' long experience teaching a variety of courses, as well as their involvement in academic projects, may have familiarized them with different types of teaching approaches. Surprisingly, Instructors teaching other disciplines tend to “depend primarily on one pedagogy” (Turner, Solis, & Kincade, 2017, p. 495).

#### 4.3. *Relevance of differentiated instruction in LSP contexts*

There is a general consensus on the practicality of differentiated instruction in LSP courses. 90% of the instructors in this study believed that differentiated instruction is both practical and reasonable. The reported relevance of differentiated instruction in LSP courses may be explained by the nature of the student population enrolled in LSP courses. Language courses in postsecondary education are populated by students from a variety of disciplines and with differing levels of proficiency. It would make sense to adopt a pedagogy that advocates instructional strategies that respond to the individual needs of students. Moreover, the theoretical underpinnings of differentiated instruction are in line with the principles of LSP teaching. For example, in differentiated instruction, pre-assessment tasks are used to identify students' readiness level. LSP instructors use placement tests and needs analysis instruments to develop courses that would match students' differing communicative needs.

#### 4.5. *Benefits and challenges of implementing differentiated instruction in LSP courses*

80% of the participants reported they find differentiated instruction as significant and worthy of the effort. Santangelo and Tomlinson (2009) conceded that “effective differentiation requires a significant amount of time, effort and dedication on the part of the instructor (p. 320). The majority of the instructors in this study seemed willing to do the additional work required to implement this instructional model in LSP courses.

60% of the participants reported the successful execution of differentiated instruction in LSP courses can be thwarted by class size and lack of training. Additional obstacles include “content coverage demands, lack of planning time and funding, grading policies, and resistance to changing current practices” (Wood & Blanton, 2012, p. 152). For example, it can be time-consuming for instructors to design and deliver instruction that is tailored to the needs of groups of students. In addition, instructors may need to provide additional resources and support to help students who are struggling to keep up with the pace of the course.

## 6. Conclusions

“There have been numerous studies conducted that show that even after receiving a great deal of training on differentiated instruction, most teachers are still not putting it into practice in the classroom.” (O'Meara, 2010, p. 2). In addition, empirical data supporting the effectiveness of differentiated instruction is, however, lacking. Tomlinson et al. (2003) warned that more work needs to be done to quantify the benefits of differentiated instruction on student outcomes. Although the results of the present study cannot be generalizable given the small size of the sample, key findings suggest the following:

- a. Differentiated instruction is a common practice in LSP courses
- b. LSP instructors have positive opinions about differentiated instruction
- c. LSP instructors already use differentiated strategies despite the perceived challenges and
- d. Differentiated instruction is congruent with the principles of LSP pedagogy.

Further research is needed to identify the types of instructional practices employed by LSP instructors and measure their effects on the development of communicative competence.

## 6. Patents

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** In this section, kindly add the Institutional Review Board Statement and approval number, if applicable, to the study. One can exclude this part if not applicable or if the study did not require ethical approval or other kinds of approval. If approval is required, provide complete details, including the institution's name, protocol number, and date of approval.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## Appendix A. Questionnaire conducted among the participants of the survey

### The Use of Differentiated Instruction in LSP Courses

#### 1. Age

- a) 25 - 35
- b) 35 - 45
- c) 45 - 55
- d) 55- 65

#### 2. Gender

- a) Female
- b) Male

#### 3. Years of Teaching Experience

- a) 5 - 10
- b) 10 - 15
- c) 15 - 20
- d) 20 - 30

#### 4. Language you teach

- a) French
- b) English

#### 5. Which LSP course/s do you regularly teach?

- a) Academic purposes
- b) General purposes
- c) Medical purposes
- d) Engineering
- e) Business
- f) 6. Science and technology
- g) Other:

#### 7. Which definition best captures the essence of differentiated instruction?

- a) Differentiated instruction refers to a variety of classroom practices that allow for differences in students' learning styles, interests, prior knowledge, socialization needs, and comfort zones
- b) In a differentiated classroom, the teacher proactively plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs
- c) Differentiated instruction is philosophy that enables teachers to plan strategically in order to reach the needs of diverse learners in the classroom today
- d) Differentiated instruction is both driven and monitored by assessment

#### 8. How would you describe your use of differentiated instruction?

- a. I do not use differentiated practices.
- b. I use differentiated practices sporadically.
- c. I use differentiated practices on a regular basis.

#### 9. Which type of training in differentiated instruction have you received?

- a. None.
- b. Read some literature.
- c. Attended a workshop and/or conference presentation.
- d. Attended several workshops and/or conference presentations.

#### 10. How often do you engage in direct whole-class instruction?

- a. Seldom (under 10%).
- b. Frequently (10% - 40%).
- c. Often (40% - 60%).
- d. Always (60% or more).

#### 11. How would you describe your personal opinion about using differentiated instruction in LSP courses?

- a. Not effective



- b. A buzzword that will fade.
- c. Somewhat important.
- d. Extremely important.

**12. How would you describe the practicality of using differentiated instruction in LSP courses?**

- a. Impractical and unreasonable.
- b. Impractical but reasonable.
- c. Practical but unreasonable.
- d. Practical and reasonable.

**13. How would you describe the benefits of using differentiated instruction in LSP courses?**

- a. Insignificant and not worthy of the effort required to implement.
- b. Insignificant but somewhat worthy of the effort required to implement
- c. Significant but not worthy of the effort required to implement
- d. Significant and worthy of the effort required to implement.

**14. Which of the following makes differentiated instruction in LSP courses challenging to implement (select more than one answer if applicable?)**

- a. Lack of training.
- b. Lack of resources.
- c. Lack of instructional time.
- d. Class size
- e. Other: