

# **Relevance of Differentiated Instruction in Special Education for EFL Slow Learners: A Study of Learning problems and Some Strategies at KAU, Jeddah**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the many desperate attempts made to improve learners' level in English, many of them have failed to attain the desired objectives. In some cases, their failure can be directly attributed to ineffectiveness of curricula, learning materials, teaching methods, administrative or infrastructural issues, etc. Some students might be affected by psychological or behavioural issues/ barriers which might take on deeper significance with the passage of time unless instruction is designed to meet to the needs of learners in general, and slow learners in particular. Differentiated instruction (DI) is one of the especially-designed strategies to meet the learning needs of special learners, providing students with varying abilities the opportunity to learn the same curriculum. However, the learning environment must be created for all students, including both inclusive and special students. This paper examines the relevance of differentiation techniques in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) with a prime focus on slow learners. This paper demonstrates some of the teaching techniques, strategies and practices, deemed critical in the given pedagogic context of learners with respect to educational needs. The findings are useful for understanding issues pertaining to slow learners of English, and the development of concomitant strategies of which differentiated instruction is one of them.

**Keywords:** Differentiated instruction, special education, slow learners, teaching strategies, diverse learners, inclusive student.

## علاقة التعليم المتمايز في التربية الخاصة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بطيئي التعلم: دراسة لمشاكل التعلم وبعض الاستراتيجيات المتبعة في جامعة الملك عبد العزيز في جدة

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### الملخص:

على الرغم من المحاولات المبذولة لتحسين مستوى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية، فإن الكثير منها فشل في تحقيق أهدافها المنشودة، إذ يمكن في بعض الحالات أن يعزى فشلها مباشرة إلى عدم فاعلية كل من المناهج الدراسية والمواد التعليمية وطرق التدريس إضافة إلى قضايا إدارية أو قضايا تتعلق بالبنية التحتية وغيرها، هذا وقد يتأثر بعض الطلبة ببعض القضايا النفسية أو السلوكية التي قد تصبح أكثر أهمية مع مرور الوقت إذا لم يكن التعليم مصمماً لتلبية احتياجات المتعلمين وخاصة بطيئي التعلم، ويعتبر التعليم المتمايز أحد الاستراتيجيات المصممة خصيصاً لتلبية الاحتياجات التعليمية لفئة معينة من المتعلمين، وهو بذلك يعطي جميع الطلاب على اختلاف قدراتهم فرصاً متنوعة لتعلم نفس المناهج الدراسية. إلا أنه يجب أن تكون البيئة التعليمية مصممة بما يتناسب وكل طالب ويشمل ذلك كلاً من طلاب التعليم الشامل والتعليم الخاص. تدرس هذه الورقة علاقة تقنيات التمايز في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية مع التركيز على المتعلم البطيء، كما تتناول هذه الورقة بعض التقنيات والاستراتيجيات والممارسات التعليمية التي تعتبر حاسمة في السياق التربوي فيما يتعلق بالمتعلمين والاحتياجات التعليمية. وستسهم نتائج هذه الدراسة في فهم القضايا المتعلقة بمتعلم اللغة الانجليزية البطيء وتطور الاستراتيجيات المصاحبة والذي يعتبر التعليم المتمايز أحد تلك الاستراتيجيات.

**الكلمات الدالة:** التعليم المتمايز، التربية الخاصة، المتعلم بطيئوا التعلم، استراتيجيات التدريس، تنوع المتعلمين، الطالب الشامل

## 1. Introduction

The idea of differentiated instruction (DI) has been one of the major themes in Didactics in the modern education system. It presupposes the existence of heterogeneous learners in a classroom. These learners come from different socio-cultural backgrounds with myriad needs, interest and ability levels. In addition, all learners don't have the same learning styles. Some may be auditory learners, some visual while others could be kinaesthetic. Bearing in mind the difference amongst learners, the use of DI for any language teacher can become a daunting task.

The proponents of DI have many success stories to narrate. This success could be an outcome of a lot of planning on part of the teacher. He has to have a lot of prior knowledge of his/her students. In a subject like Mathematics or Science when learners have to master a body of knowledge, DI implementation may not pose such a problem. However, when it comes to language learning

with all its different dimensions of reading, writing, listening, grammar, speaking etc., the proper planning and implementation of DI requires thorough introspection. The present study is conducted within the context of teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia where the use of DI is a relatively a new concept.

The concept of 'special education' is generally misunderstood. Most instructors think that special education may only be applied to physically disabled or challenged. A bright child may also require 'special education'. The researcher feels that dealing with slow learners requires specific intervention or treatment during the teaching-learning process. The issue is not always related to teaching strategies and modification, since the reality is that a few EFL learners with disabilities/difficulties characterise specific learning needs. It should be kept in mind that for various reasons, such learners may fall under 'special learners' category.

Based on the theory of individual differences, it may be conceived that most of the learners acquire

knowledge in different ways and contexts. Therefore, a single teacher is seldom able to deal with special needs learners in a single class if he follows traditional teaching method(s).

The term ‘special education’ denotes its emphasis on teaching special students who need extra help during the learning. Therefore, special education can operationally be defined as a kind of education that includes management of curriculum, methods of instruction, teaching resources, learning environment etc. Learners are considered to have special educational needs if they cannot cope with the prescribed curriculum for learners of their age. Learners with one or more of the following characteristics/qualities can be considered as those with special educational needs: hearing and visual impairment, physical and mental handicap and general learning difficulties. Present attempt is concerned with learning issues more than physical disability i.e. mental barriers to effective learning of English.

## **2. DI and Related Concepts**

This section deals with certain important concepts that are closely related to the present study. Missing any points may lead to ambiguity.

Therefore, following description sheds light on related concepts.

### **2.1. Identifying Slow Learners**

Identification of slow learners is extremely important because it will guide the line of action to meet the academic needs of slow learners.

### **2.2. Need of Differentiated Instruction**

The researcher thinks that differentiated instruction (DI) is a concept, principle or philosophy that involves teaching students with diverse backgrounds. In other words, ‘Differentiation’ means provision of compatible instruction to meet individual needs. Tomlinson (2000) defines differentiated instruction in the following way, “Differentiation means tailoring instruction to meet individual needs”. Differentiation is a concept, used in different fields such as marketing, medicine and mathematics, contends and as such is contested one. (VanTassel-Baska, 2012). On another occasion, Tomlinson (2008) adds, “Differentiation is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. To be clearer and more precise, ‘Differentiated instruction’ enhances the learning potential of diverse learners to explore deeper layers of learning. It simultaneously structures and uses curriculum to support those

students who suffer from learning disabilities. Differentiating instruction can be considered one of the keys to implement inclusive education because it includes slow learners in a normal classroom and caters to the need of learners by differentiated instruction.

In a learning situation, ‘readiness’ is considered as one of the essential conditions of effective learning in general contexts. It is equally important in differentiated instruction. It is the interest and readiness that a learner displays in addition to the capacity to adapt to the designed curricula and teaching that facilitates learning outcomes. Since the learners are not used to learning through differentiation technique, patience and readiness will ultimately be required. Since this is likely to take a student out of his usual comfort zone, a supportive environment is initially needed for better learning. The teacher has to offer some novel activities so that interest level may be raised and later maintained in order to accomplish the target of differentiation.

### ***2.2.1. Is DI Feasible at Tertiary Level?***

Some critics are of the view that DI is not an easy task. (Galton and Williamson, 1992; Galton et al., (1980); Hertberg-Davis, 2009).

Despite doubt on the usability and feasibility of DI on senior students, Tomlinson (2000) mentions “a high school science teacher who undertook an action research on the effect of differentiation saw positive results” (p. 30) In addition, it was noted that while differentiated instruction is receiving popularity in many elementary and secondary schools internationally, not much has been written about this practice in institutions of higher learning (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009). In the present research scenario, the students belong to a tertiary level of education. They are foundation year students pursuing two levels of English proficiency which is a pre requisite for entering into the specialisations (majors) in their second year. The necessity for DI becomes evident when it is realised that in entire Gulf/Middle East, English language teaching-learning is more challenging: the learners come from different socio-linguistic and psycho-linguistic backgrounds. If utilised judiciously, DI as a technique can yield positive results.

### ***2.2.2. Elements of DI***

Tomlinson & Imbeau (2010, 15) mentioned four main elements of DI: (1) content: what the student needs to learn, (2) process: the activities in which the students are engaged in

order to learn the content, (3) products: the outcome that he/she has gained from a unit or module through specified content ,and (4) learning environment: the setting in which one learns the content by involving certain academic activities. (These elements will be taken up later).

### **2.2.3. Benefits of ‘Differentiated Instruction’**

Servilio (2009) strongly contented that Differentiated Instruction is "a specific way of catering to the academic need (p.7). The target of helping the individual child can be attained by focusing on the learners’ characteristics as identified by Tomlinson (2001): readiness, interest, and learning profile. Once characteristics and needs are identified, the teacher responds by trying to deal with all students’ success in learning (VanSciver, 2005). Another benefit of differentiated instruction is the increased students’ performance in learning. Servilio (2009,10) opined that the combination of a differentiated content and the students learning preferences are quite suitable for promoting students’ success. Levy (2008, 164) claims that with the tools of differentiated instruction, the child can be taken towards further success.

### **2.2.4. Drawbacks of ‘Differentiated Instruction’**

Each principle has some drawbacks as practitioners observe. Van Sciver (2005) also noticed that differentiated instruction has some disadvantages. However, these disadvantages mainly affect the teacher. They are basically associated with time, resources, and complexity. Differentiated instruction is of course time consuming (George, 2005; Servilio, 2009). Challenges may be minimized if the instructor spares extra time in assessing, planning and executing the strategy. If not well understood, differentiation may lead to complexity. Some teachers have found it extremely difficult to implement properly for individual learner. (Schmoker, 2010, 22). Servilio (2009) mentioned yet another disadvantage of DI could be a noisy and disturbed classroom (P,10). Schmoker (2010), a critic of the theory of differentiated instruction, stated there should be evidence to defend DI’s implementation" (p. 22). Schmoker recommended a "content-rich guaranteed curriculum" to ensure the affected students to "read, write and discuss." This model (suggested by Schmoker) focuses on using a "vivid curriculum, objectives and assessment.(p.23)

### **2.2.5. The Principles of 'Differentiated Instruction'**

The general principles of differentiated instruction focus on the fact that the 'one-size-fits-all approach' is not often feasible. This issue was taken up by Tomlinson in a research work entitled 'Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of Learners (1999). Teachers must be familiar with the following key principles of DI:

1. The teacher is clear about the content/curriculum,
2. The teacher considers students' individual differences,
3. Teaching and testing go together,
4. The teacher adjusts content, process, and product in accordance with the learners' characteristics: readiness, interests, and learning profiles.
5. All students take an active part in learning activities,
6. Students and teachers are engaged in collaborated learning,
7. Major DI goals are maximum outcomes and continuous progress.
8. Flexibility is the basis of DI.

### **2.3. Relevance of Related Theories: Different Perspectives**

This section focuses on concepts, philosophies and theories that are directly or indirectly connected to the

relevance of differentiated instruction. The purpose of referring to these theories does not intend to evaluate them.

#### **2.3.1. Philosophy of DI**

DI is an academic philosophy that postulates the idea of learning in different ways due to different personality types and learning styles. This philosophy posits creating a suitable learning environment based on individual differences regarding different talents, abilities and motivation levels.

(<https://ekinknowledge.wordpress.com/2016/02/08/philosophy-of-differentiated-instruction/>)

'Differentiation' focuses on the notion of tailoring instruction to deal with individual needs of each learner, and accordingly evolves a compatible strategy. Based on the philosophy of DI, the concerned instructors differentiate content, process, products, and the learning environment.

#### **2.3.2. Sociological Perspective**

Hatcher (1998) is of the opinion that there is a positive impact of social class on academic ability and self-confidence. However, the case and extent may differ from place to place. This may lead to the interpretation that despite the implementation of DI, social class remains a powerful factor

that exerts influence on learning achievement. It should be kept in mind that DI should control such variables so attainment of aims could be possible.

Students' academic achievement and their socio-economic status (SES) seem to be quite closely related except in rare cases. Bakker (2007) contends the same. Higher socio-economic status (SES) usually indicates better academic scores than lower SES (Considine and Zappala, 2002). In this connection, Van der Berg et al. (2002) state that students from well off families perform better in exams than those who hail from poorer backgrounds. Such cases have been noticed with regard to the language learning in general and speaking skills in particular. This means that for successful implementation of DI, instructors need to adjust their instruction keeping in mind varied SES and psycho-emotional features (Valiande, Kyriakides and Koutselini, 2011).

### ***2.3.3. Differentiation: Psychological Perspective***

Many theories of psychology are connected to the evolution of differentiated instruction. 'Individual differences' is one of them. The subject deals with the psychological differences and similarities between people. Nazimuddin (2015) cites

Plato who stated long ago 'that no two persons are born exactly alike'. In current perspectives, it may be stated that people differ on account of psychological attributes and features.

### **2.4. Individual Differences**

There are many dimensions to individual differences. The dimensions associated with the present study are mentioned here. There are differences in intelligence level among different individuals. We can classify the individuals from 'super-normal' (who have above 120 I.Q.) to less intelligent people (from 0 to 50 I.Q.) on the basis of their intelligence quotient. In addition, there can be differences in attitudes resulting from economic statuses, socio-cultural issues, psychological factors and personal problems. Individuals differ in their attitudes towards other people, objects, institutions and authority.

Similarly, differences in achievement have also been considered significant. It has been found through achievement tests that individuals differ in their achievement levels. These differences are very visible in learning languages (such as reading, writing), and in learning mathematics. These differences in achievement are even visible among the children who are at the same level of intelligence.



Individuals are emotional by nature, and they naturally differ with regard to emotional dimensions. Individuals differ in their emotional reactions to a particular situation. Some are irritable and aggressive and prone to quick anger. There are others who are calmer and more composed even in adverse situations. In some cases, individuals may be so much enraged that they may be guilty of crime like murder. Another person may simply laugh at it, and walk away. Last but not least, there are differences in respect to personality as a whole.

On the basis of differences in personality, individuals have been classified into many groups. Differentiated Instruction depends largely on the theory of 'individual differences' which may be gene or environment related.

## **2.5. Theory of Multiple Intelligences**

Gardner's (1995) interest in brain function and the potential of the mind led to his theory of multiple intelligences, which revolutionized the way educators look at learning. This theory challenged the way that intelligence was perceived by those who considered IQ to be the measurement benchmark. Gardner's theory broadened the scope by which intelligence was measured and perceived.

Gardner (1995, 202) initially defines 'intelligence' as "a biological and psychological potential" that can be expanded due to an environmental influence. The growth in an individual is observed due to some factors that affect a person." The factors are basically of three main types: that experiential, cultural, and motivational. In other words, intelligence is the ability that an individual utilizes in solving a problem or achieving goals (Gardner, 1983). The theorist introduced the theory of Multiple Intelligence (MI), and identified as many as 7 types: spatial, linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. A few years after, he added one more: naturalistic intelligence (Gardner, 1999). Smith (2002) mentioned 'existential intelligence' which postulates that each unique individual will use the intelligence that he possesses as per the ability and the need.

### ***2.5.1. Linguistic Intelligence***

Since this study deals with the teaching of EFL, Linguistic intelligence is found more relevant than other types of intelligence. It is nothing but the potential or ability to grasp written and spoken form of a language. Some linguistic activities such as storytelling and article writing

allow these learners to demonstrate their strengths in languages due to linguistic intelligence (Campbell, Campbell & Dickinson, 2004).

A linguistic learner will surely show his interest in certain types of books, and he will use interesting words, read a lot and tell stories.

This paper deals with English language learning which falls under the domain of linguistic intelligence. Therefore, it is imperative to consider the theoretical perspective of linguistic intelligence so as to evolve differentiated strategies for the target learners at KAU-Jeddah.

## **2.6. Theories and Concepts of Differentiated Instruction (DI)**

Tomlinson (2001) clarified that instructors can differentiate their teaching or instruction in four main ways: content, process, product, and learning environment. In the present context, these could be considered as aspects of differentiated instruction:

### **2.6.1. Content**

The instructor differentiates the content by chalking out certain activities for students related to various aspects/levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (cited by Anderson et al, 2001): remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating. Based on the need and level of students, some of the

differentiating activities that may be adopted for attainment of learning objectives of English could be: matching synonyms, and definitions; finding opposites; answering text based comprehension questions; thinking of a situation: hypothetical or real. Exercises such as separating fact from opinion, identifying an author's view or the summary of a story can also be included.

### **2.6.2. Process**

Each student is born with certain traits. Individuals have preferred learning styles, therefore successful differentiation includes a focus on teaching related to styles: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic. All students don't require equal attention of the teacher at all times. However, students may like to perform their activities in a group or otherwise. Teachers can facilitate instruction by support based interventions based on individual needs. They can provide textbooks for visual learners, allow auditory learners to listen to audios, and engage kinaesthetic learners in interactive tasks: off and online.

### **2.6.3. Product**

The product is the end result of a lesson. This can be in the form of formative and summative assessment: quizzes, exams, tests, projects, or similar other activities. Teachers may employ differentiation technique to

involve their students in various activities that ensure learning of an educational concept in a way the students prefer, based on their learning styles. For example, visual learners can create a graphic organizer of the story. Auditory learners may be asked to give an oral presentation based on listening activities while kinaesthetic learners may illustrate a story or a similar activity. (Leopold, 2012).

#### ***2.6.4. Learning Environment***

The learning environment is an appropriate setting that maximises learning. It includes both physical and psychological elements. From the psychological and pedagogical viewpoints, instructors should exploit leadership techniques to facilitate classroom management including discipline and instruction. The activities may include some or all the following based on the situations. For example, the teacher divides students into different groups to attain specific tasks. He encourages the learners to read individually if feasible. In addition, he also instructs differently to cater for the learning needs ranging from low to high-ability students.

#### ***2.6.5. Differentiation Techniques for Special Students: Theoretical Perspective***

It is quite possible that most special students need to have their tasks differentiated in a manner that makes it easy to attain learning objectives. In this regard, the first step would be assessment of learning needs and outcomes in a given context. It has been noted that ‘Assessment’ is extremely important in a differentiated classroom. Some experts have supported the idea of assessment and measurement. Earl (2003) and Wiliam (2011) make a distinction between assessment of learning, for learning, and assessment as learning.

Technology can play pivotal role in helping special students. The concept of assistive technology can be suitably incorporated into special classes. In this regard, access to computers, screen readers, and voice recognition software can assist learners to achieve targets in a more comfortable manner. Many other educational software programs such as digital talking dictionaries and talking word processing applications may feature in learning activities especially in the learning of pronunciation, spelling, listening, reading and writing.

The support factor should also not be overlooked. In this context, behavioural and academic support is crucial. An instructor should be aware that slow learners usually express

discomfort, therefore the instructor should exercise sensitivity so as not to embarrass such students.

Instructors may extend academic support by simplifying and condensing curricular load, offer changes and modification in contents where necessary, check learner's comprehension level regularly, provide positive feedback frequently, specify tasks in gradual, deliberate and systematic way.

## **2.7. Learning Difficulties and Corresponding Strategies**

Once students are diagnosed with general and special disorders/difficulties in, appropriate strategies to address these problems should be designed and implemented. Differentiated instruction may be one of them.

### **2.7.1. Differentiated Instruction (DI) for Slow Learners**

As Tomlinson (cited by Ellis et al, 2008, p. 32) maintains, DI is nothing but a complete process inclusive of "what one learns, and how he/she learns it. In addition to it, the process of DI also includes as to how the student show their readiness /interests, and mode of learning". Differentiation is believed to stem from suspected differences among learners due to different factors (Anderson, 2007).

### **2.7.2. Tiered Assignments**

Tiered assignments are a series of interconnected academic tasks varying in contents and levels of difficulties. The activities vary in accordance with the students' readiness and level of skills, keeping in mind the diverse background of the students. Tiered assignments usually have 6 components: challenge level, complexity, outcome, process, product, and resources. Challenge Level can be one basis of tiered activity. Bloom's Taxonomy can be considered as a guide to developing learning activities and even questions. For example, students of group.1 may need content reinforcement or engage themselves in the teaching-learning activity that helps development of 'understanding' according to Bloom. Students in group 2 may already have understanding and may therefore proceed for other higher level activities. Similarly, the grading of tiered activities will take place in accordance with the need of diverse learners in general and slow learners in particular.

## **3. Review of Related Studies**

Gardner (1994) claims that past teaching was based on some assumptions that all learners are the same. Thus, one teaching style or

approach was supposed to suffice for an entire class.

Following review sheds light on certain related concepts and issues. There can be many contexts and definitions of the terms 'learning difficulty' and 'learning disability'. On one hand, 'Difficulty' is concerned with an obstacle. On the other, 'disability' is something that relates mainly to 'incapacities'. Learning difficulty includes any learning or emotional problem that affects an individual's learning ability. But, 'learning disability' is a lifelong condition that starts before adulthood, and continues to affect overall 'development'. It is generally felt that learning difficulties in general emerge out of differences in the level of memory, learning strategy, acquiring knowledge and its use. In addition, there can be differences in vocabulary knowledge apart from language coding (Baker, Kame'enui & Simmons, 1998).

A study has found that many students encounter learning difficulties in the process of retrieving verbal information (Mann & Brady, 1988). These difficulties might result from learners' poor ability to make salient connections between abstract verbal information. Evidence supports that students with disabilities are unable to adjust strategies in new

contexts because they use the strategies inefficiently and inappropriately. (Wong, 1991). Students with disabilities face difficulties in dealing with the 'code language' derived from semantics (Wagner, 1986 and Torgesen, Wagner & Rashotte (1994).

### 3.1. Studies on Special Education

Special education can loosely be defined as the process of interaction between the educator(s) and the special learners. It is concerned with the redefining and restructuring of the educational process. (McLaughlin, 1995)

An interesting study found that some traits became stronger when special education students spent some time in the general education classroom. On the other hand, they became weaker in the classrooms in which they were present for only a portion of the day (Senecal, 2001). Studies also indicate that cognitive challenge is important for special education students (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003), yet grouping by ability seems to remove the challenge from low-ability groups. It was found that and focus on reading in a fragmented way detracts from making meaning – the very skill that makes reading an engaging, motivating activity. Students referred for special education are in the main, not referred

for gifted education (Mayes & Moore, 2016).

In some of these studies mentioned above, the adults rotated into classrooms so that the extra adult was not always a paraprofessional, and the second adult provided direct, small-group or individual instruction and the instruction for those students was modified for their ability levels (Daigneault, 2003).

There is substantial evidence that a significant percentage of children receiving tier 1 or tier 2 interventions can return to general education without ever being formally identified as special education (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson 2003). Research demonstrates that when students with moderate intellectual disabilities such as Down syndrome are included in a general education setting they experience measurable benefits in literacy skills, vocabulary, and grammar comprehension (Dessemontet, Bless & Morin 2012). Khan and Asif (2017,124) state that learners are considered 'special' if they are unable to pursue the prescribed curriculum for children of their age.

### 3.2. Studies on 'Slow learners'

Slow learners are those who can't maintain the normal pace of learning. However, they are not always

considered as special education students. Factors that contribute to slow learning are: culture, poverty, family inadequacy, parental issues, inappropriate school environment, school absences etc. (Vasudevan,2017)

Genesee & Upshur (1996, 77) note, "observation is an important tool to assess skills and behaviors". Therefore, it can be utilized as a useful strategy in identifying behavioural and attitudinal issues. Lescano (1995) specifically comments on the characteristics of slow language learners which eventually require pedagogic consideration. He points out that many slow learners display difficulties in perception. Slow learners were found to ignore details, and preferred going for overall comprehension and production.

Harmer (2001) is of the opinion that learners find it easy to master skills if the teaching techniques are initially matched with learning styles. Once they start learning, their self esteem results in positive learning outcomes. Lescano (1995) suggests that instructors evaluate learners on a daily basis, and in addition use simple vocabulary, standard formats and provide multi-sensory prompts to elicit correct responses. He also recommends analyzing and dividing difficult tasks into sub groups, thus

increasing chances of group participation and learner-centred activities.

It is a known fact that all children experience school-related problems at one time or another during their school years. Teachers are occasionally required to deal with problems ranging from aggressive behaviour to disinterest in the learning task (Vasudevan, 2017).

### 3.3. Studies on ‘Differentiated Instruction’

Differentiated instruction has been recommended to address individual learning needs and to maximize students’ learning opportunities (Latz & Adams, 2011). Differentiated instruction may be useful in all classrooms because its principles are learner friendly. Many scholars agree on the important role of direct instruction in the learning process (Stockard, Wood, Coughlin and Khoury, 2018, 88). Direct instruction in “which the teacher provides strong instructional support, scaffolding, and feedback” (Kapur and Bielaczyc, 2012, 46), may be seen as pivotal to fostering students’ learning (Dean and Kuhn, 2007, 384-97).

In a multicultural context of learning, students usually require tailored instruction based on their inadequate previous knowledge,

target language background, or learners’ profiles (Parsons, Vaughn, Scales, Gallagher, Parsons, Davis, Allen (2017, 205-42). In another study, it was found that in the process of adapting instructional design to a diverse group of students, the biggest challenge was the maintenance of educational equity. (Schleicher, 2013). In order to adapt instructional design for diverse learners ‘equity’ is an important factor that influences the effectiveness of learning processes (Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, Gijbels, 2003, 533-68.)

It was pointed out by Cordova, Sinatra, Jones, Taasoobshirazi, Lombardi (2014, 164-74) that interest must also be used to identify learning profiles of students. This helps in knowing students’ instructional needs. It is significant due to fact that learner-centered instruction is considered as one of the main characteristics of culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teaching-learning in multicultural settings is often enriched by the chosen teaching technique: a way to deal with classroom differences (Piazza, Rao, Protacio, 2015, 1-20).

Tomlinson (2000, 15) offers a differentiated instruction model which emphasizes three main elements of teaching: readiness,

interest and learning profile of the target learners. On the other hand, Hall, Strangman & Meyer (2006) take a step further by asserting that ‘readiness’ and ‘prior knowledge’ are not only crucial considerations, but, also ‘learning profile’ which is perhaps more important than these prior to design specific instruction for a heterogeneous group of learners. Consideration of different proficiency levels in the target language is also inevitable in the learning process because it impacts the decision whether tailored instruction is actually required. (Craft, Khanderia, Gowda, 2013). In sum, it is important in heterogeneous classroom situations to develop awareness regarding the learners’ readiness, academic levels, interests and learning profiles so that a clear idea about pre-requisites for special instruction is established.

### **3.4. Concluding remarks**

Reviews of all the three dimensions as dealt with in the foregoing section shed light on key issues related to special education, slow learners and differentiated instruction as a technique. It has been found that almost no empirical studies were undertaken in the context of Saudi Arabian English classroom conditions given that some students are quite weak, therefore could be termed ‘slow learners. The present

study is expected to bridge the gap between past and present research.

## **4. The Present Study**

### **4.1. Importance of the Study**

The need for special education arises when learners are either bright or slow in the learning process. In the present context, learners are generally quite ‘slow’ in so far as learning English as a foreign language. Slow learners face specific difficulties for many reasons. In order to cope with some learning difficulties, an instructor may employ certain pedagogic strategies. Differentiated Instruction may be one such technique that can make teaching more effective. Target learners can consequently perform better in a given situation.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is the practice of evolving a compatible instructional strategy. The engaging in this practice may attempt the following: developing, modifying and using materials, and conducting different student-based assessment to cater to the learning needs of individual learners especially in a diverse classroom. The English classrooms in Arab countries in general and Saudi Arabia in particular often mitigate against DI due to inappropriate learning materials and lack of suitable teacher training.



Therefore, an attempt in this direction is certainly of great significance. The findings may be instrumental in contributing to the development of curriculum and specific teaching strategy.

#### **4.2. Target Based Tiered Instruction:** Content, Process and Products

When teachers design tiered assignments according to difficulty levels and complexity, the main focus of instruction depends on the understanding of students' needs. Outcome is another point to be considered in the process of tiered instruction. This requires student groups to achieve similar outcomes corresponding to learners' 'readiness'. Tiered assignments can also be differentiated pertaining to the 'product'. Resources are also important considerations for making tiered instruction more effective.

##### **4.2.1. Content**

In most institutions, content (in the form of books) is always available. However supplementary materials can always be added. The following are suggestions for students with different needs: Audio, Vocabulary logs, Videos, online resources. The selection of official content and authentic (relevant) material via technology is important in expanding the knowledge of gifted learners. Web

resources can be a motivating factor for students who find traditional material boring. By providing a list, or creating practice exercises such as a 'fill in the blank', one can vary language activities for different types of learners in a single class. It is also beneficial to provide visual learners opportunities for independent study to expand their knowledge base. (Tomlinson, 2001)

##### **4.2.2. Process**

Process is the means that interprets the content and ideas that are outlined in the curriculum. Each student needs time to think about new material and make sense of it.

**Activities** - The activity portion of a lesson allows time for the students to make sense of the information that has been presented. Providing time to complete an activity allows the student to process and internalize the information. It is important to ensure that the activity is meaningful and is promoting new learning at an appropriate level for the students. This means it should match a student's readiness level. The activity portion of a lesson is a great time to tap into different learning styles.

**Group Work** - Talking and interacting with peers allows information to be processed and can tap into higher learning as the

discussion progresses. The following in a list of strategies to focus on processing in the classroom as suggested by Carol Ann Tomlinson (2001): creative problem solving, Jigsaw Labs, Making Models Philosophical, Cubing Graphic Organizers, Learning Logs, Literature Circles, Role Play, Think-Pair-Share etc.

#### **4.2.3. Product**

Product shows what the student learned over the course of a unit which can be used as a means of evaluating and marking a student's understanding. Generally, assignments are a better way to assess learning than tests, because the stress is reduced and motivation can be higher due to a sense of "ownership" with a project.

Following are types of products that created with differentiation in mind: Build a power-point or webpage, Conduct an experiment, Create a game/ a model, Draw a cartoon, Give a speech, Make a brochure/a photo collage/ a poster, Write a newspaper story/an essay/ journal entries/ song or poem. (Tomlinson, 2001)

#### **4.3. Statement of the Problem**

As a matter of importance and an immense need in the field of research in the area of English language

teaching in order to evolve teaching strategies for slow learners, the present attempt is made. Differentiated instruction has been conceived as one of the strategies for teaching English to diverse learners with specific difficulties.

#### **4.4. Research Objectives**

The study will analyze almost all the factors that can be technically related to the pedagogy of the target language-English. There are many hidden objectives of the proposed research work, however, due to the limitation of the study, only a few specific objectives will be targeted.

##### **4.4.1. Main Objectives**

Main objectives of the present study are:

1. exploring the reasons of slow learners' style of learning EFL in Saudi context,
2. identifying common learning difficulties faced by slow learners and teachers of English,
3. analyzing different methods used for attaining the language targets,
4. studying a few appropriate strategies of English language teaching,
5. evolving DI strategies to foster learning for EFL slow learners at KAU-Jeddah.

#### **4.5. Hypothesis**

There is no difference between the results obtained through DI as a strategy for slow learners and the traditional method of teaching.

#### **4.6. Sample**

This study involved two sections of students (25 & 27 students; see table-1), 15 teachers of KAU-community college (Table: 4.2.1), Jeddah (KSA) and 25 teachers of English across the world especially the middle east and India (table:4.2.2). The selection of the EFL/ESL teachers across the world was done on the basis of the social and professional networking sites such as LinkedIn, researchgate and facebook. Experimental teaching and test results will be the main source of data collection. The regular test(s) of the course/class will serve the purpose of testing.

#### **4.7. Tool**

A questionnaire (Appendix-D) was adapted from Whipple (2012), and modified by the researcher to elicit the required data. However, content validity was further checked before administration of the tool. It is important to mention that KAU-CC teachers had already attended a workshop on the topic of 'differentiation' and related issues.

#### **4.8. Ethical considerations**

According to Bryman and Bell (2007), following points are the most important ethical considerations: Research participants should not be harmed in any ways, dignity of researchers must be ensured, consent should be obtained, privacy of research data must be protected. In addition, anonymity of the concerned individuals and organisations should be assured. Besides, affiliations in any forms, sources of funding, as well as any possible conflicts of interests have to be declared. Lastly research should be done with honesty and transparency, and misleading information, or misinterpretation of the results need to avoided.

Keeping the above points in view, the researcher obtained consent from every participant in the research (teachers and the students). In addition, the researcher tried his best to be transparent enough in clarifying the objectives of the research, and confidentiality regarding collection of data and use. Management of the college was also informed, and formal consent was sought, the sample teachers and students belong to the concerned university, though.

## **5. Data Collection and Analysis**

### **5.1. The experiment**

Based on the theory of DI (mentioned above), the experiment

elicited certain key points for integration into the differentiated lessons.(Appendices-A, B & C: Lessons based on tiered activities)

The data represent two groups of students (experimental: N=25 and

controlled: N= 27). Subsequent calculations such as means, SD and error scores belong to the test performance of the said two groups.

**Table-1: Groups statistics**

Values	N	Means	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	25	20.2800	5.55668	1.11134
Controlled	27	24.8000	6.73300	1.34660

**Table-2: Mean differences**

Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		Lower	Upper
4.48000	1.74597	.96950	7.99050
4.48000	1.74597	.96623	7.99377

**Table -3: t-test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for equality of means		
		F	Sig	t	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Experimental	Equal variances assumed	.184	.670	2.566	48	.013
	Equal variances not assumed			2.566	46.333	.014

The t-value is 2.56 where ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, we can say that there is a significant difference between the two groups. The obvious interpretation is

## 5.2. Qualitative Analysis of Questionnaires (Appendix: D)

that the experiment of Differentiated instruction has a positive effect on the learning outcomes.

### 5.2.1. Data based on the questionnaire (KAU teachers of English: N=15)

(Data given below denotes percentage)

**Table-4: (KAU-CC teachers' responses in percentage)**

S.N.	JA	UD	DA
1	55	27.4	17.6
2	70	20	10
3	82	18	00
4	12	58	30
5	47	33	20
6	79	11	10
7	65	15.4	19.6
8	71.4	14.2	14.2
9	63.9	14.2	25.8
10	68.8	13.6	17.4
11	68.2	19	1.61
12	70	11	19

**5.2.2. Data based on the questionnaire (Other teachers of English=25)**

(Data are presented in percentage)

**Table-5: (Other teachers' responses in percentage)**

S.N.	JA	UD	DA
1	45	35	20
2	75	14	11
3	79	12	9
4	32	51	17
5	55	31	14
6	83	16	11
7	88	8	4
8	65	26	9
9	81	8	11
10	59	29	12
11	42	32	26
12	83	9	8

**Item wise analysis of the responses of both the samples of teachers**

**Item-1:** 55% respondents (group1-KAU teachers= N 15) and 45%

(group-2: other teachers=N25) agreed that Differentiated instruction (DI) deals with teaching learners of varying abilities/needs in one classroom.

2-70% teachers (group.1) and 75% (group-2) affirm that knowledge of students' interests is important for effective instruction. It validates one of the components of differentiated instruction.

3-82% teachers (group.1) and 79% (group-2) confirm that they assess students' level and readiness before commencement of teaching.

4-Only 12% teachers (group.1) and 32% (group-2) are able to react on differentiation of materials according to learners' needs and abilities. It probably contradicts one curriculum for all. While the fact is that broad outlines of curriculum/syllabus/aims remain the same while activities differ. And, additional materials are pedagogically incorporated.

5-47% teachers (group.1) and 55% (group-2) are in agreement with the pace of instruction varies according to learners' progress. Therefore, grouping is sometimes inevitable for effective delivery.

6-79% respondents (group.1) and 83% (group-2) are of the opinion that multiple teaching modes are effective for attainment of desired outcome(s).

7-65% teachers (group.1) and 88% (group-2) confirm that they actually use multiple modes of instruction in reading, writing and grammar exercises.

8-Around 71% teachers (group.1) and 65% (group-2) consider student's learning styles while teaching.

9-Around 64% (group.1) and 81% (group-2) agree that flexibility in student grouping can facilitate different academic tasks.

10-More than 68% teachers (group.1) and 59% (group-2) are aware of student's learning difficulties and they accordingly address them in lessons.

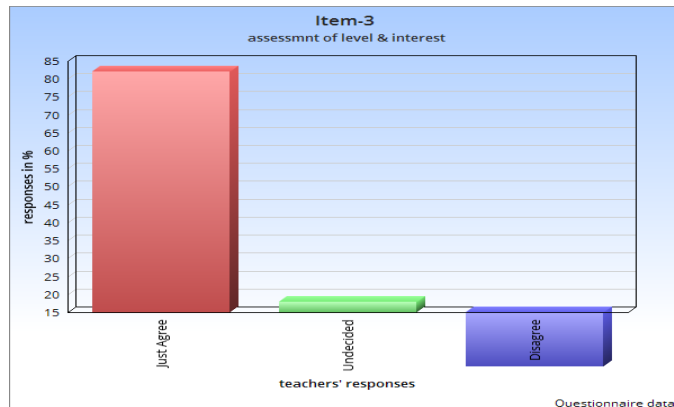
11-Exactly 68.2% teachers (group.1) and 42% (group-2) support the idea of

assigning different academic tasks to learners according to their levels.

12-70% teachers (group.1) and 83% (group-2) confirm that they integrate materials rather than relying solely on the prescribed standard text. This validates the concept and practice of differentiated instruction in a class of diverse learners which mostly include slow ones. The reason being they pursue English as a foreign language which they were not exposed well in the past in addition to different learning styles and lack of positive reinforcement.

### Analysis of specific items

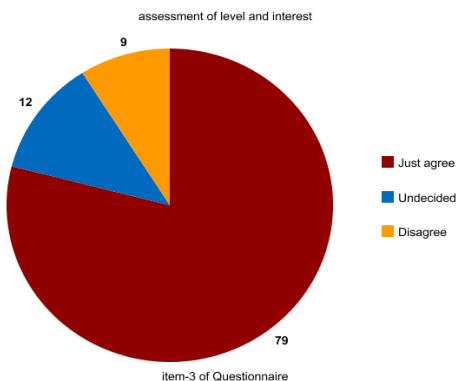
**Item-3:** I assess students' level and readiness before commencement of teaching.



**Graph-1. Showing agreement of KAU teachers**

The graph shows that 82% KAU teachers agree while 18% could not decide. This shows that assessment of readiness and academic level is quite crucial at the start of teaching. This is one of the components of

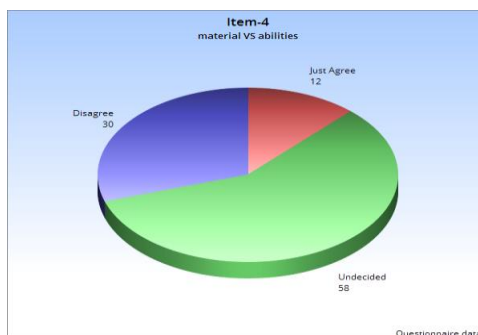
Differentiated instruction as well. Thus, it is proved that even if an English teacher is fully aware of DI or not, he practices it.



**Graph-2. Showing agreement of other teachers**

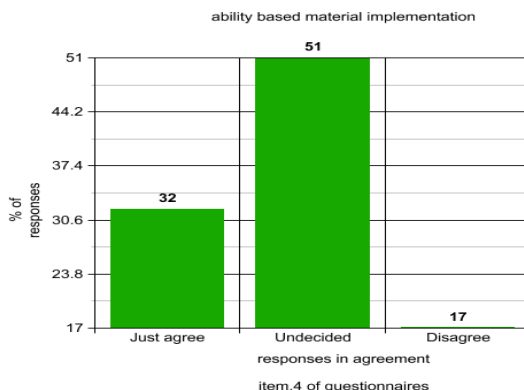
The graph shows that 79% teachers in general agree that assessment of readiness and academic level is pedagogically significant at the start of teaching. They may not be aware of principles or philosophy of DI, yet they unknowingly practice it. Moreover, both the teachers groups are quite similar in perception and practice.

**Analysis of item-4:** Materials should be differentiated according to learners’ needs and abilities.



**Graph-3. Showing agreement of KAU teachers on item-4**

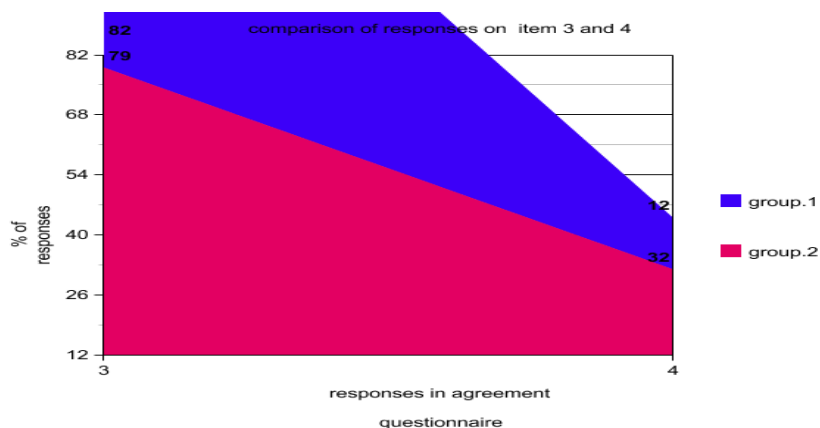
The graph shows that only 12% 79% KAU teachers think that teaching/learning materials should be differentiated according to learners’ needs and abilities. This leads to an interpretation that they don’t want to change learning materials, however method of teaching may be an open choice. They may integrate additional/authenticate material(s) to differentiate teaching-learning activities according to specific levels of students and needs.



**Graph-5. Showing agreement other teachers on item-4**

The graph-5 shows that 32% general teachers are of the opinion that learning materials should be differentiated while 51% are

undecided. Perhaps they don't have clear cut idea as to what to do. May be they had not attended any CPD on DI for slow learners or special children.



**Graph-6. showing comparison of responses of both the samples**

A comparison of data on item 3 shows that 82% group 1 and 79% group2 teachers confirm that they assess students' level and readiness before commencement of teaching. It has a link between pre-teaching assessment and its pedagogic relevance. While responses on item- 4 shows that only 12% group 1 and 32% group-2 teachers believe that differentiation of materials according to learners' needs and abilities is important.

## 6. Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

### 6.1. Findings

The study revealed that there is a significant difference between the results elicited from two methods of

teaching: 'traditional' and 'differentiated instruction'. Based on qualitative data analysis, it was found that DI is relevant in the English classroom especially in Saudi Arabia where students vary in their background of the target language. The study also revealed that many teachers are aware of DI. Many of them employ the principles and techniques of DI even without realising they are differentiating their instruction. However, it was noted that there is a need for formal training of the teachers that all the teachers working in the given context of diverse classroom(s). The difference between the responses of the two groups of teacher may be due to their varied experiences, training and working conditions.



## 6.2. Conclusions

Based on the above findings it is concluded that 'differentiated instruction' affects the results of the EFL learners. The findings are in tune with Simmons (2015) even though he focused on 'Reading' only. Morgan (2014) also supports the idea that DI maximises improvement opportunities. Jones, Yssel & Grant (2012) focused on 'Reading' considering it a more crucial area and found that tiered instruction was beneficial. It is found that the perceptions of the two groups of teachers varied on account of significance and implication of differentiated instruction in English classrooms. Be that as it may teacher development programmes may be organized to acquaint teachers with existing DI theory and classroom practices (with examples). This is likely to facilitate the process of attainment of DI aims and objectives. In this regard, the participants must confirm that they plan their lessons with differentiated instructional principles in mind. The teachers should also bear in mind that the objectives of DI vary from reading, writing to grammar exercises etc. DI needs to assess student's learning styles while preparing for teaching, assessing and re-planning. Such activities can be followed in all the

aspects of DI be they content, process or product. Instructors were found to have been using differentiated instruction to create flexible grouping. However, they may not be well aware of the principle or theory of such an activity. It was also noted that instructors are aware of students' learning difficulties and how to address them in lessons. This facilitates the attainment of DI objectives. The teachers also assigned differentiated homework which has a connection with the presence of diverse learners in a class.

## 6.3. Implications for Practice

Differentiated instruction is initially a teaching principle based on a specific philosophy which can be converted into an instructional strategy. However, it is an easy concept to comprehend and practice. It requires continuous professional development especially on the issue of practical lessons by different modes including simulated teaching. Time factor is extremely crucial in order to manage differentiated instruction. Therefore, administrators are also required to develop thorough understanding of the theory and practice of DI for effective contribution of successful implementation of DI.

## 6.4. Suggestion for Further Research

Although data gathered for this study reveal perception, understanding and implementation of DI, further empirical investigations are imperative to deeper to research:

1. A study on effectiveness of DI in the teaching of English in general,
2. Factors Affecting implementation of DI
3. Professional development of DI instructors

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## Appendix –A (Example of Differentiated lessons)

### Differentiated Lesson (Grammar) – Group: A

#### Learning Objectives:

1. Develop awareness of grammar items (nouns) fluency through reading and rereading,
2. Identify nouns in the text
3. Learn regular and irregular plural formation
4. Change plural of the nouns
5. Differentiate count and non-count nouns

#### Teaching-Learning Activities

1. Nouns (words, pictures, definitions)
2. Spelling (plural nouns)
3. Categorise: regular and irregular forms
4. Differentiate (count and non-count)
5. Use in sentences
6. Take a quiz
7. Follow up

#### Additional Activities

1. Previous knowledge – Unit-1: Introduce yourself
2. Find out all the nouns used in the text
3. Read unit one in the workbook and find Nouns and their contextual uses,
4. Online resources - Use an Internet Search Engine to look up types of nouns,
5. Take online Quiz
6. Assignment Cards – Make a list of nouns around you at home and write their plurals.

#### Weekend/home task

1. Make a list of nouns around you at home and write their plurals.

#### List the nouns (names) that you eat every day.

Singular	Plural	singular	plural	singular	Plural

#### List those nouns that you use daily.

Singular	Plural	singular	plural	singular	Plural



## Appendix- B

### Differentiated Lesson (Grammar) – Group. B

Learning Objectives (Same like group. A)

#### Teaching-learning Activities

1. Nouns (things around learners), group them
2. Inductive approach (integrated by teacher)
3. Try definitions
4. Common noun VS proper noun
5. Plural formation of common nouns
6. Spellings of plurals
7. Differentiate (count and non-count)
8. Use different kinds of nouns in sentences
9. Take a quiz

#### Additional Activities

1. Previous knowledge testing ad need analysis
2. Ways to find nouns
3. Read unit one in the workbook and find Nouns and their contextual uses,
4. Online resources: se an Internet Search Engine to look up types of nouns,
5. Take online Quiz

#### Weekend/home task

##### Group common and proper nouns:

Common nouns	Proper nouns	Common nouns	Proper nouns	Common nouns	Proper nouns

##### List count and non count nouns:

Count nouns	Non count nouns	Count nouns	Non count nouns	Count nouns	Non count nouns

## **Appendix- C**

### **Differentiated Lesson (Grammar) – Group: C**

#### **Learning Objectives**

(same like group. A&B)

#### **Required Activities**

1. Nouns (meaning, definitions, uses)
2. Inductive approach of teaching grammar (NOUNS)
3. Singular VS plural forms
4. Types of nouns especially proper and common ones.
5. Spelling rules (plurals of common nouns)
6. Count and non-count: differentiate with examples.
7. Differentiate word (noun) and word (verb)
8. Use in sentences: verb and noun
9. Take a quiz

#### **Additional Activities**

1. Testing parts of speech through inductive approach
2. Learn nouns, uses and importance in a sentence
3. Differentiate by sorting out types
4. Use web resource: use an internet search engine to look up types of nouns,
5. Teach by testing on paper
6. Take online Quiz on the internet (in the class and at home)
7. Assignment cards: make a list of nouns around you at home and write their plurals.

#### **Task: Circle the nouns in the following sentences:**

1. Players play in the grounds.
2. A player plays in that ground every day.
3. Ali gets many calls every day.
4. Ali calls his family in the morning.

## Weekend/home task

List the nouns (names) that you find/listen/see every day.

Place	person	thing	place	person	thing

List those nouns that end with -y, and change to plurals.

Singular	Plural	singular	plural	singular	plural

List those plural nouns that end with 's'.

Words	plurals	words	plurals	words	plurals

Check ( ) nouns in the following words:

Words		Words		Words	
Players		Plays		calls	
sounds					
Cooks		Sleeps			
Copies		photocopiers		copies	

## Appendix-D

**Questionnaires:** (Adapted from Whipple, K. A., 2012)

N=15 (JCC Teachers)

Abbreviations: (JA= Just Agree, UD= Undecided, DA= Disagree)

**\* Responses are calculated in percentage (%)**

SN	Statements	JA	UD	DA
1	Differentiated instruction (DI) as a principle deals with teaching learners of varying abilities/needs in one classroom.			
2	Knowledge of students' interests is important for effective instruction.			
3	I assess students' level and readiness before commencement of teaching.			
4	Materials should be differentiated according to learners' needs, and abilities.			
5	The pace of instruction varies according to learners' progress.			
6	Multiple teaching modes are effective for desired outcome/s.			
7	I use multiple modes of instruction in reading, writing and grammar exercises.			
8	I consider student's learning styles while teaching.			
9	Flexibility in student grouping can facilitate different academic tasks.			
10	I am aware of student's learning difficulties and I address them in lessons.			
11	I assign different academic tasks to learners according to their levels.			
12	I integrate materials rather than relying solely on the prescribed standard text.			
Any comments:				
.....				
.....				
.....				
.....				
.....				