

Differentiation Practices among the English Teachers at PERMATApintar National Gifted and Talented Center

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Abstract

PERMATApintar National Gifted and Talented Center is Malaysia's very own school for Malaysian gifted and talented students, established since 2011. The center provides differentiated teaching and learning across all academic subjects that require teachers to modify lessons according to learners' learning preferences. However, initial implementation of differentiation raised challenges faced by the teachers. Specifically, this study explored the practice of differentiation in ESL classroom among the English teachers at PERMATApintar and its effects on the English language learning of Malaysian gifted and talented students. Three English teachers participated in this qualitative study exploring their experience in providing differentiated lessons for the gifted and talented students. This study found out the English language performance of the gifted and talented students was not as expected even though differentiated ESL lessons were provided. This study also revealed that English teachers faced challenges in preparing and implementing differentiated teaching and learning, and that a guideline for preparing a differentiated lesson for ESL classroom is needed for a better implementation of differentiated teaching and learning among the gifted and talented students. Further studies should investigate the more appropriate differentiated classroom strategies in the teaching of English language that suit the Malaysian gifted and talented students, and develop a differentiation procedure especially for the gifted and talented students in Malaysia.

Keywords: differentiation, differentiated instruction, differentiated learning, gifted and talented students, ESL

1. Introduction

Through its education system, Malaysia determines to provide the school students with the necessary knowledge and skills for the 21st century by ensuring that every student receive "opportunity to fulfil their potential", through promoting "proficiency in at least... English language", providing "special care" to "groups with needs", and strengthening the pedagogy (Ministry of Education, pp. 4-10). This conceptual education vision features, among others, the inclusion of gifted education (Ministry of Education, pp. 4-15) and the implementation of differentiated instruction in the teaching of English language (Ministry of Education, pp. 4-10). Both features are present at Pusat PERMATApintar Negara, UKM (PERMATApintar). The year 2011 has seen Malaysia, through PERMATApintar, paving its very road in gifted education after having received the first batch of gifted and talented students.

PERMATApintar provides differentiated learning to the gifted and talented students. The education program of PERMATApintar is based on the national education curriculum, which consists of various subjects such as Malay language, English language, History, Islamic Education, Chemistry, Physics, and Biology. The curriculum is differentiated, i.e., requires teachers to prepare lessons by tailoring the national curriculum according to the gifted students' learning preferences. Differentiation compliments Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligence theory that individuals vary in terms of how they learn and think. Gardner (1983) initially proposed that there are at least seven intelligences within an individual that influence his or her learning; and, these intelligences vary from one individual learner to another. By differentiating lessons, teachers develop strategies and materials based on the students' preferred modes of learning hence ensuring that every student receives appropriate opportunity in learning.

Differentiation is also supported by Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development reflects teachers' modification of curriculum elements according to learners' learning preferences by providing students with different levels of support and different levels of challenges that would stimulate growth in their learning.

Even though differentiation is widely practiced; however, Savage (2011) stated that scholarly literature pertaining to the impacts of differentiation on gifted students is very much lacking. In addition, Launder (2011) revealed that studies examining the effects of differentiation on learners are limited.

Nonetheless, the existing studies revealed that teachers did not see the need to differentiate their lessons, while Schumm and Vaughn (1995) found out teachers believed that differentiation is unrealistic and not the focus of their main job. Another study revealed that teachers have failed in differentiating their lessons due to their inability to treat gifted and talented students as different individuals (Reis et al., 2004). This was because teachers were not prepared to apply differentiated strategies simply because they have not been using them in any sustainable manner (Reis et al., 2004). At PERMATApintar, the teachers have reiterated the similar, as they faced challenges in implementing differentiation in their teaching. An investigation into their experience of differentiating instruction as well as its effects of students' learning would contribute to better implementation of differentiated learning at PERMATApintar, and would benefit both the teachers and the gifted students.

2. Literature Review

In gifted education, pedagogical differentiation provides choices in learning for gifted students. Through differentiation, lessons are tailored and varied according to the gifted students' learning preferences. In Malaysia, PERMATApintar National Gifted and Talented Center (PERMATApintar) is the only school that provides differentiated learning experience to Malaysian gifted and talented students. The impacts of such learning experience has yet to be established; thus, this study explored the practice of differentiation among the teachers at PERMATApintar, and the effects of differentiation on the gifted students' achievement, focusing on English language subject.

2.1 Differentiation

Differentiation refers to teachers' instructional approach in teaching through modification of curriculum elements (content, process, product, environment) according to learners' learning preference (readiness, interest, learning style, gender, age). Differentiation came out of the belief that every individual learner varies in the way they learn (Anderson, 2007). Tomlinson (2001) states that differentiation requires teachers to provide variation in learning avenues in terms of acquiring knowledge or information through teaching materials and assessment measures that are developed based on learners' preferences. Differentiation, thus, is a proactive teaching and learning approach that caters for the differences that exist among learners, in which teachers match appropriate content, process, and product with the learners' current levels of readiness, interest, and preferred mode of learning.

Therefore, teachers can differentiate, modify, or tailor the content, process, and product of a particular curriculum through appropriate instructional strategies, or tasks, developed based on their students' current levels of readiness, interest, and learning profiles. Differentiation has been practiced widely in the United States serving not only the gifted and talented students, but also the mixed ability students from public schools.

2.2 The Impacts of Differentiation

Many studies have been conducted examining the effects of pedagogical differentiation on students' learning. Most of the studies on differentiation investigated the instructional strategies applied, and the impacts on the students as well as the teachers.

2.2.1 Instructional Strategies

Among other instructional strategies used for pedagogical differentiation include collaborative teaching and cooperative learning, flexible grouping, ability grouping, and independent study, and tiered tasks or activities. While York-Barr et al. (2007) found out that collaborative teaching is useful for English language learners, Lavadenz and Armas (2008) revealed that English language learners were found to be engaged as they involved in cooperative learning that provides them with meaningful conversation activities. Mixed results were found with regards to tiered tasks. Chen (2007) and Kobelin (2009) stated that tiered performance tasks were beneficial for English language learners, and convenient to implement. However, Letalova (2008) stated that tiered assignment was not as effective. Gault (2009) supported that tiered approach nonetheless provides variation for students to choose for their preferred modes of learning. The studies that focus on grouping strategies such as flexible grouping, ability grouping, and independent study revealed that these contributed to positive learning, as students were engaged and challenged in the classroom (Bondley, 2011; Palmer & Maag, 2010).

2.2.2 Differentiation on Learner's Motivation and Achievement

Gibson (2005) stated that differentiation contributes to positive impact on students' growth. This is because through differentiation teachers provide social-like activities that challenge the learners and allow them to manage their own learning and hence become more motivated (Anderson, 2007; York-Barr et al., 2007; Bailey & Williams-Black, 2008). In addition, through differentiation, learners were found to become more independent, competent, and increased their self-image (Lavadenz & Armas, 2008; Valiende & Koutselini, 2009). Despite positive impacts on the learners' motivation in learning, studies on the impact of differentiation on learners' academic achievement revealed inconsistent results. Savage (2011) stated that differentiated instruction might not be the only factor contributing to students' academic performance. In a previous study, Miller (2007) found significant negative correlation between differentiation and academic achievement. Other studies (Gault, 2009; Gorman, 2011; Valiende & Koutselini, 2009) however, found out that differentiation leads to improved academic achievement. Recently, Tramonto (2013) revealed that the practice of differentiation increased students' achievement.

2.2.3 Teachers' Perspectives on Differentiation

Even though some studies have indicated positive outcomes of differentiation on students' learning, it is not without challenges as faced by teachers. VanTassel-Baska (2005) stated that not all teachers believed in the advantages came out of differentiating their lessons. According to her, teachers have yet to understand that each learner differs from one another in terms of how they see things, how they learn and absorb information from around them (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). Tomlinson et al. (2003) stated teachers need to have high motivation and determination in practicing differentiation. This is because differentiation seems to be daunting and time consuming. Reis et al. (2004) found out in a study that lessons were not actually differentiated and students were not appropriately challenged. Robison (2004) stated that this is because of limited time and the absence of established differentiated techniques. Hertberg-Davis (2009) mentioned that differentiation is unsuccessful because of the rigors involved. Differentiation requires time, training, planning and long-term commitment from everyone (McQuarrie & McRae, 2010). Failure to provide structured planning and preparation may increase teachers' workload and thus they will become stressful (Bondley, 2011).

3. Methodology

Qualitative method was employed to investigate the differentiation practice of English teachers in the teaching and learning of English language, and its effects on the gifted students' learning. The study was conducted during the second semester of 2014 academic year, i.e. from June to October. The interview was scheduled in advance at the time and location agreed by both researcher and interviewees. Semi-structured interviews – with open-ended questions – were conducted on three English teachers in order to gauge their insights based on their experience in differentiating their lessons in the teaching of English language at PERMATApintar. Semi-structured interview was chosen due to its flexibility in terms of the options for further questioning of a particular interviewee's response. A list of pre-determined open-ended questions were organized, including additional questions emerging from the interview sessions. The questions are as shown in the following.

1. What is your perception having implemented differentiation in the teaching of English language?
2. What do you think of the effects of differentiation in your students' English language learning?
3. How do you think differentiation can be better implemented?

3.1 Participants and Data Collection Procedure

The participants for this study were three female English teachers of PERMATApintar. Two of them graduated with Bachelor of Education in Teaching of English as a Second language (TESL), and one with Bachelor of English Language and Literature. They had received initial trainings on differentiation. The interviews involved face to face interview procedure. Based on the interview protocol, the participants were briefed on the aim of the interview as well as the interview procedures. The participants were also informed that the interview session would be tape-recorded.

Table 1. Participants background data

Participants	Qualification	Teaching Experience	Differentiation training
Female English Teacher (Nilon)	B. Ed Tesl	> 10 years	About three times
Female English Teacher (Afif)	BELL	< 3 years	About three times
Female English Teacher (Dya)	B. Ed Tesl	> 5 years	None

Table 1 displays the background information of the English teachers participated in this study. In order to ensure the participants to be as anonymous as possible, they were labeled with pseudonyms. All of them are female and the only English teachers at PERMATApintar. The participants had received some trainings on differentiation while one had never received any. The interview questions, as well as the analysis, gauged the experience of the English teachers in providing differentiated lessons for the gifted students, and the effects of differentiation on the gifted students' English language learning.

3.2 Data Analysis

In order to analyse the data gathered during the interview, researcher must interpret what was actually revealed, and categorize them into themes or codes (Creswell, 2007). The themes, or codes, should be of any phrases that were consistent as gathered from all the participants (Kvale, 2007). In order to ensure validity of the analysis, the researchers of this study conducted follow up interviews mainly to ensure the interpretation of the data consistent with every interviewee's data.

In the analysis, the researchers looked into the experience of the English teachers in applying differentiation for their English language classroom. Specifically, this study explored the perspectives of the English teachers towards differentiation, and their views towards the effects of differentiation on the gifted students' language learning.

4. Findings and Discussion

Differentiation involves aligning learners' learning preferences in accordance with curriculum elements. Through differentiation, teachers modify their lessons based on the students' current levels of readiness, interests, or their learning profile e.g. learning styles. Specifically, teacher can differentiate the curriculum elements (i.e. content, process, product, environment) based on the background information of their students (i.e. readiness, interests, learning profile). Indeed, this displays the scopes that teachers have to cover in preparing a single differentiated lesson.

During the interview sessions, the English teachers were asked about their general thoughts on having used differentiation in their teaching. Despite having different teaching background and experience (see Table 1), the answers gathered from the English teachers were rather similar to some extent. The teachers provided both positive and negative answers towards differentiation.

One of the positive answers stated "It contributes a lot to the students... it is very student-centered." An example of a negative answer was "But I had to do a lot of things, I spent more time on preparing a lesson. But there was never enough time because we had other important things to do too." It can be interpreted that the teachers revealed differentiation as beneficial to the students; however, it became challenging because of insufficient time due to other related teaching tasks. The teachers were asked further about in what way differentiation contributes to the students. One of the teachers said, "As a teacher for these gifted students, I have to attend to their needs, so in teaching I have to know what they want, what they like for English lesson, so this makes them become more involved, not bored, because they tell us what they want to do." When they were probed about "other important things" that they mentioned, this refers to their involvement with meetings and discussions pertaining to the programs organized by PERMATApintar. When they were asked about "not/never enough time", the teachers stated that they were struggling in coming up with strategies, or tasks, and materials for their lessons. One of them said, "It's difficult to find what material will suit them." This is supported by Hertberg-Davis (2009) who mentioned that differentiation is unsuccessful because of the rigors involved. In addition, Bondley (2011) stated without proper planning, teachers' workload may be increased and led them to become stressful.

The teachers then were asked to describe the effects of differentiation on the gifted students' language learning. One of the teachers mentioned, "The students enjoyed their time during class." Another teacher said, "Some students seem to be engaged in their work, but there are few who seem less interested, perhaps I should have let them go for self-learning." The teachers then were asked about the students' English language examination result after experiencing their differentiated lessons. Palmer and Maag (2010) stated differentiation contributes to positive learning because learners are engaged and challenged in the classroom.

One of them stated, "Not all of the students perform well in the exam, only few, most were average." Another teacher said, "In general, some of them can speak English, but their test results were okay." The other teacher said, "Their English results were fair, they may be gifted and talented, so it could be better." This might be due to the absence of established differentiated techniques as time was limited for the teachers to produce the appropriate ones (Robison, 2004). Thus, the lessons might not actually be differentiated or were not appropriately challenged for the learners (Reis et al., 2004).

In the final stage of the interview, the teachers were asked to explain how could differentiated teaching for English language at PERMATApintar be better implemented. One teacher insisted, "We need to be skilful... through trainings... it would be really helpful if we had a module." When the teacher was asked to elaborate on "... if we had some guides", she meant to say that great amount of time would be saved if they had ample trainings and reference on differentiating their lessons. Another teacher said, "The preparation for teaching would be easier if we could choose from existing materials, or tasks." The teacher explained that she could prepare more lessons at one time if she did not have to spend time brainstorming for activities, and developing materials for the activities. The other teacher said, "Perhaps we could have our own template to differentiate." When her answer was probed further, she explained that she preferred to have a step-by-step method to produce the differentiated lessons.

It is clear from here that the problem was on the teachers' difficulty in preparing their lessons, thus, might also contribute to the average achievement of the gifted students in English language as revealed by the teachers in the interview. This might be due to the time constraints, as differentiation involves rigorous tasks (Hertberg-Davis, 2009). The teachers suggested that it would be easier to have a standard procedure in differentiating a lesson as well as a prescribed list of strategies and materials especially for English language teaching and learning.

5. Implication for Practice and Future Research

Differentiated teaching has been deemed appropriate for advanced students such as gifted and talented students. This study revealed differentiated learning as experienced by the English teachers at PERMATApintar. In the English language classroom, some gifted students have benefitted from differentiated learning, but some might need other instructional strategies. This is why, as mentioned above, differentiation requires time, training, planning and long-term commitment from everyone (McQuarrie & McRae, 2010). Thus, failure to provide proper planning may increase teachers' workload and thus they will become stressful (Bondley, 2011).

The present study indicated that differentiation indeed is daunting and time consuming. Thus, teachers are required to have high motivation and commitment to implement differentiation (Tomlinson et al., 2003). As such, teachers really need to understand and embrace the fact that each learner differs from one another especially on how they see things, how they learn and absorb information from around them (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). Differentiation thus poses challenges in English language teaching in terms of insufficient time to design strategies and develop materials for the gifted students. The teachers indicated that designing appropriate strategies for the gifted students was the most difficult part as they were struggling within limited time to brainstorm and select appropriate strategies and relevant materials. Differentiation is indeed necessary and has become relevant in today's pedagogical spectrum. Current researches have revealed many perspectives that described increase in students' motivation and achievement. However, a more empirical study exploring the association between differentiation and motivation as well achievement, would be more beneficial in the teaching and learning of English language.

Administrators alike should take note that more can be done in order to ensure appropriate implementation of differentiated learning. One of these could be developing a guideline, or a schema, of differentiation that would guide teachers to produce consistent lesson plans systematically. Teachers should also work together in producing a pool of teaching strategies that are specific for their learners' context, and suit according to learners' learning preferences, especially their levels of proficiency. Having a list of prescribed teaching strategies and materials designed based on the learners' learning preference would be very convenient for the teachers.

Further studies pertaining to differentiation for English language teaching and learning, especially at PERMATApintar, should investigate the optimal ways, such as a guideline, that would guide teachers to differentiate instruction for English language teaching and learning, as well as look into instructional strategies and materials that are appropriate for the gifted students in the teaching and learning of English language.

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