

Exploring Differentiation of Chinese Public English Education in Middle School

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Abstract

This study aims to find out how English teachers in Chinese public-school view and apply stratified teaching in their classroom. The study is part of a larger qualitative study. Four participants are from a middle (junior-high) school in China. This study adopts the combination of interpretivist paradigm and constructivism worldview. The methods used for the study included: one to one semi-structure interviews, and classroom observations. Based on the analysis of the field data, this paper explored the differentiation in teaching. Detailed examples are given to illustrate how and why teachers apply multi-level teaching in English teaching. The main findings include: The middle school English teachers in China consider differentiation as an effective method and tend to apply it in their classrooms. The reasons are not only to implement teaching students per their aptitude but to better meet the teaching objectives related to Zhong Kao (Chinese High School Entrance Examination).

Keywords: Differentiation, Differentiated Instruction, Stratified Teaching

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Introduction

Since 1949, English education in China has experienced several ups and downs that are closely related to the socio-political climate and economic development of this country. Several reforms and reforms have been implemented regarding English curricula and standardized tests (Adamson, 2004). Due to the influence of globalization, the Chinese government has long considered English as a vital strategy towards survival in the global era. The role of English in China is currently at the highest point in history as a compulsory subject in the curriculum of public education; nevertheless, Chinese society still has a huge influence on English education (Adamson, 2004; Richards, 2017). Government and bureau of education policies, parents' and teachers' attitudes and beliefs about English education, and national economic development have all influenced the English curriculum today.

In June 2001, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) published "The secondary Education Curriculum Reformation Guideline (Beta)". It raised five specific goals for secondary education course reformation: 1) reform the large input-based curriculum; 2) amend the degree-oriented curriculum system and the lack of attention among various subjects; 3) adjust the current situation where course content being 'challenging, manifold, biased, timeworn', and focus too much on the textbook knowledge, 4) change the current situation that curriculum emphasizes on memorizing and reception learning acceptance, 5) modify the over-emphasized function of differentiation and selection for curriculum evaluation, 6) improve the over-centralized course management situation. Based on the Guideline (Beta), the key points of the secondary education curriculum reformation are to make student form a positive and initiative learning attitude, modify teaching approach to encourage students participate in active, hands-on learning; to develop students' ability on collecting and processing information, on obtaining new knowledge, on analyzing and solving problem, and on communication and collaboration. Teachers are expected to rethink one's educational pedagogical approach, reflect on one's teaching approach, redefine one's teaching objectives and rebuild teaching quality evaluation system.

In April 2003, the Chinese government published the new "English Curriculum Standard" (MOE, 2003), which symbolize another round of English curriculum reformation. The purpose of the high school English curriculum revolution include: 1) structure a new language teaching ideology, modify the curriculum settings to be more contemporary, fundamental, and selective; 2) build a flexible teaching objective system that is more instructional to English education in different stages and regions; 3) form a multi-dimensional and open English curriculum evaluation system to include feedback as an actual part of teaching process; 4) construct a standardized textbook system and a resourceful curriculum system to ensure the success application of the English courses.

In 2011, the new curriculum reform (MOE, 2011) requires that in the educational and teaching activities, teachers should base themselves on the individual differences of students, recognize and respect the differences of students, and promote the comprehensive development and individual development of students. The new English curriculum standard puts forward the core concept of "facing all students, highlighting the subject of students, respecting individual differences, and focusing on quality education" (MOE, 2011). Therefore, in the educational and teaching process, teachers must proceed from reality, treat students differently according to their individual differences in their learning ability, learning methods, learning interests and learning attitudes, organize teaching activities in a targeted manner, unify requirements, and teach students in accordance with their aptitude, to meet the

different learning needs of students at different levels and ensure that every student can learn something. To further explore differentiation in real classroom, this research stepped into a middle school in Chinese public educational system.

Middle School English Education

Most official documents mentioned in the chapter above indicate that English teaching methods are expected to create an “active class” and use English as the primary target language (MOE, 2011). Yet, observation has shown a gap between what happens in the classroom and the government “promoted” teaching method in the previous curriculum reforms (Wu, 2012). The motivation behind teacher-centered, grammar-translation methods in Chinese secondary English education is the “deeply rooted examination culture,” where National Matriculation English Test (NMET) plays a key factor in deciding what will be taught and learned in classrooms (Pan & Block, 2011; Xue, 2015). Thus, English teachers in China focus primarily on vocabulary and phrases provided in the textbook. Explicit grammar teaching and reading comprehension is also emphasized to better serve students’ need for high scores in NMET (Zhu, 2011).

However, the significant amount of grammar content in teaching has hindered students’ achievement in using English as a language to communicate (Zhou, 2017). The instruction of focus on form but not focus on meaning in secondary English education results in few opportunities to use this language communicatively and leads to so called “dumb English” (Zhou, 2017). Many students have no trouble writing or reading but have little to no oral competence (Yu et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Chinese society addresses the importance of oral English and emphasizes the “standard” English spoken by native speakers (NS) in England and North America (Wei, et al., 2016; Fang, 2010). Given this attitude, students feel anxious about their Chinese accent and lack confidence to use English communicatively (Wei, et al., 2016; Fang, 2010). Moreover, students are used to interacting with “created materials” (Richards, 2017) in both textbooks and exams, which aim to cover learned vocabulary and grammar. As a result, some students fear being criticized when talking to NS.

The status of English teachers in China also adds to the drawbacks of students’ listening and speaking competence. Teachers are toned down by teacher education that does not emphasize oral competence, less professional development on pedagogical transformation, limited school resources, and pressure from exam-focused students and parents. Teachers’ options are limited unless the exams change (Luo et al., 2019; Yan, 2015; Zhao et al., 2016).

Zhong Kao

With the ups and downs of English education, the teaching resources, theories, and approaches changed accordingly. Zhong Kao (high school entrance exam) is a required test to be taken before a student graduate from middle school. It aims to examine students’ English competence level comprehensively and accurately. Zhong Kao differs in various regions in China according to the local policy. It is a proficiency test most of time, but also acts as an achievement test at times (Huang, 2008). In most second-tier cities including Harbin, the grade of Zhong Kao could decide which high school the student will attend. Therefore, the content of this exam has great impact on learning objectives in middle school English classes.

Theoretical Basis of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction has a long-standing theoretical and practical foundation worldwide. Confucius (BC 551-479), an ancient Chinese sage, was the first to notice the individual differences of students during the Spring and Autumn period. He advocated "teaching students in accordance with their aptitude"(Confucius, 2016). Different teaching methods are implemented according to different students' interests, individual intelligence, learning habits and methods, so that students can develop better. In the western world, the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) raised by Vygotskiĭ (1978), has become a cornerstone of educational theory. The ZPD refers to the difference between what a learner can do without help and what they can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner, which is the potential ability and possibility that students will acquire through learning (Vygotskiĭ et al, 1978). Different students have different zones of proximal development, so teaching must follow the principle of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. This concept underscores the importance of scaffolding in education, where the teacher or a more capable peer supports the learner's development, gradually transferring responsibility as the learner becomes more proficient (Thompson, 2015). American educator Bloom's (1976) mastery learning theory believes that although each student's learning methods, learning levels, and learning potential are different. Based on collective teaching, teachers provide students with the necessary personalized help and guidance and sufficient learning time, and the vast majority of students can achieve the mastery standards specified in the course objectives. These educational theories all become fundamental theories of differentiated teaching.

According to Tomlinson (2000), differentiation is associated with the efforts teachers make to respond to variance among their learners. And whenever a teacher adjusts their teaching approach for an individual or small group to enhance the learning experience, they are practicing differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction means that in the same class, teachers scientifically divide students into several groups of similar levels and size according to differences in students' existing knowledge, ability levels, interests and hobbies, potential tendencies, etc (Algozzine and Anderson, 2007). Then carry out differentiated standard setting, differentiated teaching, differentiated evaluation, so that students at all levels can learn something and develop (Algozzine and Anderson, 2007). Differentiation is not just one strategy or a collection of strategies; it is a comprehensive approach that takes individual differences into account for every task, offering flexibility in how students engage in their learning (Tomlinson, 2000). For differentiation to be effective, it requires a well-thought-out plan, a strategy that enables teachers to transform their intentions into practical application (Tomlinson, 2000). In mainstream classrooms, teachers can achieve differentiation via content, process and product (Fitzgerald, 2016).

Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the differentiation practices and the teachers' perception in Chinese middle school classroom setting. This study employed a qualitative approach with semi-structured interview as the main data collection instrument. Qualitative approach is considered the most effective approach to illuminate and explore multiple realities, particularly within collaborative research environments. It allows researchers to get an in-depth view on specific cases, especially when it takes place in real-life context.

(Creswell, 2017). Qualitative research interviews are employed by researchers to uncover the meanings of central themes within the life world of their subjects (Jupp, 2006).

Sampling and Recruiting

Selecting the participants requires careful consideration to ensure appropriateness. The target population in this study was EFL teachers who were respectively teaching in public middle schools in Harbin. I was able to involve 2 teacher participants (P1 and P2) from the chosen middle school. P1 has sixteen years of public middle school teaching experience, P2 has six years. Participation was voluntary in this study. Thus, it was important to explain the purposes and process of the study. A PIS (plain information sheet) and consent form clarifying the study's purpose was given to participants. I emphasized during my explaining that participants (teachers and pupils) can withdraw their consent at any time during the research project.

Ethics

In qualitative research, it is essential to protect human participants and follow ethical standards. The requirement of ethics review procedures when conducting educational research in universities has heavily grown since the 1990s. Institutions require researchers to submit applications seeking approval to conduct research (Head, 2020). When planning the research, I considered ethical issues addressed in Crocker (2009) and followed the ethical guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). The study was approved by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

It was essential for this study to ensure participant's anonymity and confidentiality. Researchers should ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of informants by removing identifiable details and securing data (BAAL, 2021). All contributions made by them that have been video recorded will be deleted, and copies of materials previously shared by them will be destroyed. Participant pseudonymity (Bulmer, 2001) will be incorporated into the consent. Besides mentioning the anonymizing in the consent forms, at the beginning of all interviews, I also told the participants that I would try to as much as possible to protect their privacy. They were assured that the information they provided would be made anonymous, and any identifiers would be either deleted/blurred out or exchanged with codes.

Data Collection

For this study, I gathered data via individual interviews with each teacher. These interviews took place in a quiet and private setting on the school premises, chosen by the participants to ensure their comfort. Each face-to-face interview section was expected to last approximately 40 minutes and was scheduled at a time convenient for the participants. To ensure accuracy and prevent the loss of data, I recorded the interviews using a voice recorder, and an additional device was available as a backup in case of technical issues, ensuring compliance with GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) regulations for data protection.

Data Analysis

According to Kowal and O'Connell (2014), as a step of qualitative data analyzing, "the generic term transcription here refers to any graphic representation of selective aspects of

verbal, prosodic and paralinguistic behavior (p. 5)". All collected data was first transcribed in mandarin into a separate Word document. After completing the transcripts of all interviews, I entered the data analysis stage. Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyze the research data, following the approach in Braun and Clarke (2017). Having undertaken a rigorous analysis of inductive coding and developing themes of the transcripts, the researcher presented the findings under five main headings: (1) student stratification; (2) differentiated teaching/learning objectives; (3) differentiated instruction; (4) differentiated assessment and evaluation; (5) challenges and considerations.

Findings

Student Stratification

Student stratification is the key to the stratified teaching model and plays the most important role in the entire stratified teaching activity. The teacher participants firstly comprehensively grasped the individual differences, learning foundation, emotional attitude and learning potential of the students in their classes. Then, according to these situations of the students, they dynamically stratified the whole class into three layers in the way of invisible stratification within the class, the grade level.

T1: The students in my class are extremely polarized. Let me give you an example. When we first started our class, there were 18 kids who couldn't write the 26 letters (in 3rd grade). There were 48 children in our class. When the good kids in our class already understand the things for the ninth grade. I divided the class into three levels, A, B and S. Well, at first, it was actually divided into two levels, A and B. Later on, because the good kids at the front of our class were particularly good, I added a S level.

Based on T1, it is clear that in this context, T1 stratify students mostly based on their competency level, instead of their learning habits.

Differentiated Teaching/Learning Objectives

Achieving teaching/learning objectives is the ultimate goal of conducting hierarchical teaching activities. According to the high school English teaching syllabus and the individual differences of students at different levels, different teaching objectives that match the actual abilities and actual levels of students at different levels are studied and designed to establish a clear orientation for teaching. According to the overall requirements of the new curriculum standards, teaching objectives are hierarchical into basic objectives, middle-level objectives and extended objectives.

In differentiation practice, basic objectives require all students to complete. For example, all students in 4 classes are required to master the majority of words, phrases and grammatical structures that appear in each unit. Middle-level objectives require students at levels A and B to complete and encourage students at level C to master them through hard work. For example, P1 and P2 require students to memorize the new vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures in each unit; but level C students are expected to memorize less new vocabulary. Extended objectives are an extension of the high school English curriculum content, cultivating the comprehensive language application ability of excellent students, and

this goal can be achieved as long as students at level A are achieved. Below are the examples that T1 and T2 shared with the researcher in their interviews.

T1: For example, if I take the word "look" and expand it, the basic students only need to remember "look at, look after", "look for", etc., because these are phrases that sixth graders need to master. But I will let the students with higher abilities expand it in depth, such as "look through" and so on.

At the same time, for example, "look at something carefully", normally it is "look at something carefully", but I will put "carefully" in the middle of "look at", and then do a fill-in-the-blank question or multiple-choice question, and let the high-ability students, choose one of these options. In this way, it also exercises the analytical ability of the high-ability students. So basically, in my class, I use this way more to create questions to test the high-ability students. Then it is more about the children's abilities, rather than simply being taught phrases.

T2: ... So the premise is that you have to tell them, you have to let them know which level they are, and what they need to do, so that there will be some students who are not very clear about what to memorizing at the beginning ... and during my lecture, I will tell them that this is what the A-level students need to memorize, this is what the S-level students need to memorize, and this is what the B-level students need to memorize

As we could see in the transcripts, for T1, help students achieving good scores ZhongKao was not her only teaching objectives. Where it was possible, she preferred to go depth in the knowledge point for the level A and S students to help them develop language competency.

Differentiated Instruction

When talked about differentiated instruction in classroom practice, both participants shared their thoughts.

T2: ...I will first focus on the textbook, that is, I will explain the things in the textbook to them thoroughly, and then, the requirement is that all students in the class must master the knowledge points. Then for those good students, I will take the knowledge related to the, 7th, 8th , and 9th grades, or some typical questions from the high school entrance examination, to let them do a deep expansion. In this way, in the classroom, for ordinary students, they will know the basic knowledge, and for good students, they will also be improved, so my class is basically designed like this.

To make it clearer, below is a real example in practice when T1 used for her 6th grade class. In figure 1, the fifth sentence of “how heavy” is a key sentence pattern in the first unit of the 6th grade, which is “how heavy + be”, a verb plus a noun. For all students in level S, A, and B they need to master this sentence pattern.

In figure 2, there are more sentence added at the end, “what's the weight of”, “how much do/does something weight”, which should be a knowledge point in the 7th grade of junior high school. And the word weight’s transform into the verb weigh. T1 took somethings from the higher grade here. For level A students, they need to master those. Furthermore, there are two groups of Chinese-English translations below. These two groups of Chinese-English

translations are designed according to the three sentence patterns of “how heavy + be” and make the sentence structure meaningful. If for students whose foundation is not very good (level B), they can put nouns into these three sentence patterns, and they will get three sentence patterns even they are not sure how to use them. But for good students (level A and S), they should be able to memorize and understand these three sentence patterns. At the same time, they can also remember the other extended equivalent sentence. To comparing the two groups of sentences together, which allows “good students” to integrate knowledge.

Lesson One

I. Words and expressions

1. **dinosaur** / 'dainəsɔː / n. 恐龙 ②点对点
2. **than** / ðən / conj. 比…… (比较级中) 比较级 + than ②点对点
3. **big** / bɪɡ / adj. 大的 - bigger - the biggest 辨析 { big 大的(形状) ②点对点
large 大的(体积)
4. **house** / haʊs / n. 房屋 - houses (pl.)
 ⇔ housework n. 家务劳动 (u.n.)
 do the housework 做家务劳动
5. **heavy** / 'hevi / adj. 重的; 猛烈的 - heavier - the heaviest ②点对点
 ⇔ heavily adv. 重重地; 剧烈地 - more heavily - (the) most heavily ②用法
 How heavy be + n. ……有多重? ②同义句
6. **ton** / tʌn / n. 吨 tons of + c.n. (pl.) / u.n. 许多; 大量 = a lot of = lots of
7. **size** / saɪz / n. 尺寸 ②点对点
 the size of… ……的尺寸 + v. 是/是
8. **shoe** / juː / n. 鞋
 通常以复数 shoes 形式出现, 用所有修饰可数名词复数的词修饰
 a pair of shoes 一双鞋

Figure 1: T1's Note on Learning Guide

= What's the weight of…?

= How much do/does + n. + weigh?

weigh v. 称重 ↔ weight n. 重量

汉译英: 1. 这头大象多重?

How heavy is this elephant?

= What's the weight of this elephant?

= How much does this elephant weigh?

2. 这些苹果多重?

How heavy are these apples?

= What's the weight of these apples?

= How much do these apples weigh? ②

Figure 2: T1's Note on Differentiated Learning Objectives

Differentiated Assessment and Evaluation

In the research context, two commonly used assessment are vocabulary quiz in class and everyday homework. In the data collected, besides differentiated objectives, T1 adjust assessments based on student levels as well.

T1: Then, in addition to the stratification in teaching, I also adopted differentiation in the quiz of words and phrases. So, when the students in these three levels were tested on words and phrases, I used a different setting. Well, because. I used English handout created myself for teaching. There were all the usages of words, the collocations of words, the sentences in the text, and the original text in the textbook. It was something like this.

...in terms of homework, we also divide it into different levels. For students with poor grades, we basically ask them to memorize words, ...focus more on memorization. And for children with better grades, there will be extra test papers. I will find some questions for them to do.

However, T2 thought of the topic slightly differently.

T2: As for homework, it is usually difficult to stratify it, because every assignment has to be covered in class, so basically, um, everyone thinks it is similar, um, as long as it is written, it is similar.

There will definitely be different requirements in the evaluation. Well, because students with average or slightly lower levels, um, may not be able to do some physical work, for example. Well, for such students, the requirements may be slightly relaxed.

Challenges and Considerations

Both participants raised the same concern on the challenge part of apply differentiation in their teaching, which is the size of class. They both mentioned it was hard to divide the class to equal amount to all level of students. So that they could all gain something from their teaching.

T1: Even I think differentiated instruction is very good, but it also has a drawback...Some students may be neglected because of my stratification, ...what about the children in the middle? ... but they are not yet that kind of extreme good. If you put them in the bad ones, it will be a waste for them. So I divided they into three layers, ...then there are too many layers. Then there is a problem, that is, you may only be able to pay more attention to one certain layer.

T2: Actually, this method, as I said, is still a problem of applying it. Well, because, you always have to teach the whole class. In the classroom, you teach nearly 50 people. For example, if you have to teach 15 questions today, then if you say that this question is difficult, the students behind can stop listening. I think for those children, in this class, they don't gain much.

Another point worth noting is that the two participants consider the psychological impact of differentiation to their students in opposite ways. T1 consider differentiation brought her students a positive environment of competition. While T2 worried about that will cause negative emotions for level B students.

T2: I think it is difficult to apply, because students with good and bad grades are all in the same classroom, so it is impossible to say that a certain homework, some students do not need to do it. Well, I think for the students with poor grade, this will also cause a psychological gap for them.

Conclusion

The study explored the differentiation in classroom practice and their views of two teachers using semi-structured interviews. The study showed positive results as both preservice teachers developed their own pedagogical strategies and considerations regarding applying differentiated instruction on their teaching. This study is, however, small in scope as only two participants were involved in the data collection. Thus, the findings of this research may not be generalizable or apply to other teaching contexts.

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