

## **Enhancing Students' Participation through Differentiated Strategies in the ESL classroom**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to investigate the application of differentiated strategies in the ESL form 4 to improve students' participation. Qualitative research design is employed. Samples consist of 25 students of mixed proficiency level. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the samples. The instruments involved in data collection were an audio-video teaching session and the researcher's reflective entry. The findings revealed that the types of differentiated strategies such as differentiation by instructions, the task given to students, the type and amount of support given by the teacher to the students, the outcome expected from students employed, time given to complete a task, supporting individual preferences and feedbacks given during the teaching and learning helped the students to participate actively in the ESL classroom

**Keywords:** Differentiated strategies, students' participation, classroom discussion, ESL learners.

## INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian education system has now improved in terms of the fluidity of the syllabus and scheme of work. As English has become the second language in our education system, we have seen a lot of improvements made by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to be on par with other education systems around the world. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has been introduced to our education system with the aim to reach the international standard for the teaching and learning of languages. With the application of CEFR, students are expected to gain a targeted level before graduating from high school. However, it can be difficult to reach the targeted level set up by the MOE because every student has different capabilities in learning the language. English language teachers have to spend time observing different types of students and how they learn individually. This is because each student has different ways of grasping knowledge and these differences can bring a lot of disadvantages during the teaching and learning process if not tackled professionally by the teacher. When this issue is not being addressed accordingly, students may struggle in participating in classroom activities and discussions because of the general method of teachings that do not match certain students' abilities. Upon this, some students may not receive the same input as other students, and some may have difficulties in giving feedback in the classroom. Differentiated strategies are introduced in our education system to ensure that knowledge input is catered to the students' individual needs.

Chapman, King, and King (2005) stated that differentiated strategies may appear in many forms such as speed and the process of students in acquiring new skills and understanding. By applying differentiated strategies in the classroom, students can connect to their prior knowledge to understand which techniques work the best for them. It is a must for teachers to acknowledge students' abilities, unique knowledge, specialties, interests, attitudes, behaviors, and intelligence to identify the method that matches perfectly for students to use in the classroom so that students can participate actively in classroom activities. This can be done through discussion.

Reese and Wells (2007) stated that discussion is considered as a valuable learning tool. Classroom discussion acts as a platform where students voice out their opinions by sharing their thoughts on certain topics. It is very useful as a practice of critical thinking because it requires the student to give a response to other's views too. However, sometimes classroom discussion can be viewed as an obstacle for students to showcase their creative thinking skills as some students may feel insecure to let people know their thoughts on a topic so rather than sharing their original idea that might be something new to learn, students rather settle for something that is acceptable in general. Student participation is one of the biggest hurdles that teachers these days have to face. Shore (2017) stated that student participation is needed in students' learning process. Extra attention should be given to student participation especially for student-teachers to ensure that the learning and teaching process takes place.

Hence, the learning objectives can be achieved. It is not only for achieving the teacher's goals for the subject, but it is rather important to monitor students' understanding of the lesson and how far they have progressed. When students participate in classroom discussions, teachers can easily tell their comprehension based on how they react to the matter discussed. When teachers are able to tell the students' level of understanding, there will be room for teachers to correct the students if they were wrong about something. This shows that by participating in class students are able to share their ideas with the class, as well as they can tell if they have misunderstood the lesson.

Regardless of the subjects, many benefits can be obtained when students participate in classroom discussions.

### *Integration of Differentiated Strategies in Classroom*

Chapman, King, and King (2005) stated that differentiated strategies may appear in many forms such as speed and the process of students in acquiring new skills and understanding. By applying differentiated strategies in the classroom, students can connect to their prior knowledge to understand which techniques work the best for them. It is a must for teachers to acknowledge students' abilities, unique knowledge, specialties, interests, attitudes, behaviors, and intelligence to identify the method that matches perfectly for students to use in the classroom.

Baecher et al. (2012) suggested that teachers can offer students a variety of activities and let them do the differentiating. It is believed that students know in which activity they can perform the best. By making the learners pick first, teachers will be able to identify the learner's interests and needs. Tomlinson (2001) suggested that giving the students responsibility for their learning will help them become independent and aware of their own needs. Students can track their progress by making a plan for their learning process. Teachers can guide the students to list down their weaknesses and strengths so that the goal of the lesson can be seen clearly. With the collaboration of students and teachers on working to identify the students' area of needs, differentiation strategies in the classroom can be done easily.

### *Benefits of Integrating Differentiated Strategies in the ESL Classroom*

Lawrence-Brown, Tomlinson (as cited in Suban, 2006) mentioned that once the students received encouragement from teachers in a differentiated classroom, students will start to seek to be independent and self-sufficient, they will feel determined to learn more about their specialty, capabilities, and opinion and the sense of responsibility in their own learning and live will increase as well. By making students feel normal with the ability differences, students will be more accepting towards themselves as well as they will act more mature towards their learning. Differentiation towards the learning process will save students from labels, in return, students are given individual chances to accomplish their own goals (Tomlinson, 2003).

Jacques and Salmon (as cited in Malacapay, 2019) stated that differentiated strategies such as differentiation of instruction are important since students are able to experiment with their own style in acquiring and processing information such as seeing, hearing, reflection, and action, thought analysis and imagination. Hall (2002) mentioned that the aim of differentiation is to maximize each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting in the learning process. A customized plan for each student to use during the learning process will help students to understand better their own strategies in order to complete the learning objective successfully. The flexibility of differentiated strategies will help teachers in watching the students' personal growth by looking at how students develop the ability and desire to share their personal reactions, connections and interpretations (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005).

### *Students' Participation in the ESL Classroom*

Ewens' (2000) define discussion as a diverse body of teaching techniques that emphasize participation, dialogue, and two-way communication. Howard (1998) explained in his study that classroom discussions are spontaneous, not easily created thus it is an important aspect of participation. When students can participate in a discussion naturally with each other, it shows the level of understanding for each student towards the learning. It is safe to say that when a student cannot get involved in a conversation about a topic during a classroom discussion, the student has a high tendency of not understanding the whole context of the learning.

According to Aziz, Quraishi & Kazi (2018) stated that there are five steps in the active involvement process: preparation, contribution in the discussion, cooperative skills, communication skills, and presence. Students who can complete these steps are more likely to actively participate in classroom discussions. By planning what to share, students are already stepping into the next step of participating. It is even better when students can work on their cooperation and collaboration skills. This is because the discussion could not occur from an individual, but a group of shared ideas and opinions. The lack of preparedness and not enough time to clearly formulate their thoughts as one of the main reasons why students find it hard to participate in a classroom discussion. Cohen (2018) believes that students can be brought actively into the teaching-learning process and can facilitate teaching by their participation in the classroom. In the classroom, students should be aware of how to be an active learner, such as students must involve actively by playing the roles of information seekers.

### *Benefits of Students' Participation in Classroom*

Mustapha (2010) mentioned that active classroom participation such as "talking about what they are learning, writing about it, relating to past experiences and applying it to their daily lives" will be a great help to students in their learning process rather than just becoming a passive listener in a classroom. Broucker et. al, Carey (in Bergmark & Westman, 2018) stated that student engagement is seen as having a positive effect on the achievement rate of students, which is an important factor in quality measurement. Wade (1994) believes that an ideal classroom discussion requires participation, interest, learning of all the students and Davis (2009) believes that when students are passionate and are always ready to participate in the classroom especially through verbal engagements, it will create a conducive classroom environment.

According to Mustapha (2010) an active classroom participation such as talking about what they are learning, writing about it, relating to past experiences and applying it to their daily lives will be a great help to students in their learning process rather than just becoming a passive listener in a classroom. Bergmark & Westman (2018) stated that student engagement is seen as having a positive effect on the achievement rate of students, which is an important factor in quality measurement. Wade (1994) stated an ideal classroom discussion requires participation, interest, learning of all the students and absorbing others' explanations and information. As we went through multiple kinds of research, it is identified that an active classroom discussion involves two elements: participation and passion.

Once students are passionate enough about the topic to be discussed, there is a high chance that students will participate actively in the discussion. It is because the topic selected is suitable for the students' preferences and interests.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Data Collection*

#### *Reflective entry*

Instruments used to collect the data were: teacher's reflective entry. Reflective entry is a summary that teachers write about their teaching such as the classroom management, students' behaviors, their hopes and expectation during the lesson, and also their feelings after the lesson. Through writing in the reflective entry regularly, practitioners gain a greater understanding of their students, their likes and dislikes, their racial and cultural history, their attitudes, and their languages and cultures (Gil-Garcia & Cintron, 2002). By writing a reflective entry, teachers can better understand their students while tracking their behavior and responses to the activities in the classroom. Teachers can identify areas that require improvements to suit the needs of students and make amendments to their next lesson by enhancing their methods of teaching. In this research, the researcher has written down her reflective entry based on a lesson.

#### *Data Analysis*

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher uses this method to evaluate documented information received from the reflective entry. From the journal entry the general themes were identified. By observing the general themes of the reflective entry, the researcher can interpret the main focus and the problem in this, thus making the process of analyzing the data become more efficient and precise.

## RESULT AND FINDING

The results are discussed based on the research question.

*RQ1 What are the types of differentiated strategies that can be applied in the classroom?*

The qualitative data is analyzed using the reflective entry of the researcher. The researcher observed differentiated strategies used in her lesson and how can the differentiation help her to enhance students' participation during classroom discussion.

### *Excerpt 1*

*"I found that not all students can understand my instruction well. What I did after I realized that was, I try changing my instructions into simpler words. I found that one type of instruction may not be suitable to be used for all of students. This is because every student understands instruction differently. By giving few different types of instructions according to my students' needs will help ease the process of my lesson."*

Based on the above excerpt, the researcher found that she was not prepared to apply different approaches for each student while carrying out the activity. In this case, the instruction given was too general and wide. Based on the researcher's explanation, it seems some of the students find it hard to follow the instructions given, resulting in a lack of understanding of the given task. It is great that she managed to improvise her instructions giving method on instant based on the students' requests however, it would be better if she came prepared so that her lesson can be done efficiently. In another part of her reflective entry, the researcher stated that some of her students were not attentive in contributing actively during classroom discussion. She assumed that it occurred because of the lack of curiosity about the topic discussed.

### *Excerpt 2*

*"...., I thought the activity was somehow too simple or rather uninteresting for some students. When this happens, fewer students will participate in the activity, especially during classroom discussion. I figured that my students have a different interest while carrying out the activity. Thus, the lack of choices in my lesson plan has 'forced' some of my students to contribute even though they might not be able to enjoy the activity, unlike others. This issue has concerned me a lot since my students will receive different input from my lesson because of their lack of interest and understanding."*

This shows the researcher's thoughts on how her students were feeling 'forced' to join the classroom discussion.

### *Excerpt 3*

*"I figured that maybe the time allocated will be enough for the students to read through the ~~xt~~ but when it happened in the class, it was not what I expected it to be. It turned out that some of my students needed more time to comprehend the whole text. This is because each student has their speed in reading and comprehending text. I realized that the time allocated was put according to my own experience."*

The issue mentioned here by the researcher was time management or the time is given for students to complete a task. It became a concern to the teacher when the time she has allocated for a task was not enough for the students to finish it. From the teacher's reflective entry, the researcher realized that the teacher has not considered the differences in students' speed in reading. Students' speed, especially in reading and comprehending text should be taken seriously for all teachers especially English teachers since we have to understand that learning ESL is about understanding its meaning. One of the basic foundations of learning any language should be understanding the context of the language in a written text. This is why the students' differences in comprehending a text must be noticed by language teachers, especially for ESL teachers. When teachers assume that every student can reach the same level of understanding at the same time, the students with slower speed will be struggling in following the teacher's planning. While other students may move to another task, some students may still try to understand the text given by the teachers. This is why time allocated for each student to complete a task, even a simple one, should be managed carefully by teachers. By differentiating the time assigned for each student according to their needs, it will only be fair for everyone to involve actively in the lesson.

## **DISCUSSION**

Towards the end of the researcher's reflective entry, the researcher stated her lack of understanding of differences in capabilities, interests, and needs of her students. Looking at the lesson planning, the researcher found many areas of improvement that she should consider to expand her teaching skills and techniques. Teachers need to know their students well. When teachers can study why the students act in a certain way, their lifestyle outside the classroom, their topic of interests, aims and goals, cultures, and beliefs, it will become clearer for the teacher to see the best way to encourage the students to study well. Knowing what is the best learning strategies for your students will be the first step in assisting them to reach their individual goals. After that, teachers can work for their own goal, and in this case, the goal is to make students participate during classroom discussions. The researcher believes that people will only participate in something when they have an interest in it. Once teachers have gained knowledge about their students' interests and needs, it must be easy for the teachers to pick the best topic to be discussed during classroom discussion.

The findings revealed that the researcher applied three out of eight differentiated strategies that have been listed in MOE KSSM (2018) scheme of work for English Language. The strategies that the researcher implemented includes differentiation by instruction and feedback, differentiation by the type and amount of support provided, differentiation by the time given to complete a task. In the data analysis, it was shown that these strategies had given the impact towards the researcher in assisting her to enhance the students' participation during classroom discussion.

## CONCLUSION

The application of the selected strategies occurred naturally, effectively helped the researcher in enhancing the students' participation during classroom discussion. However, the researcher has identified lack of understanding of her students' needs, and for that reason, she was unable to practice more structured strategies for her students. To understand students' differences in needs and abilities the researcher has gone through various studies on strategies that are available to be used in the classroom. The researcher has gained knowledge on how to understand her students' differences in needs and abilities. Although differentiated strategies benefit all learners it takes a lot of effort from experienced and prepared instructors. This kind of teaching will surely assist learners to produce their best job. This teaching technique might be the most important trend in the educational system's future.

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