

Policy Brief

Transforming Higher Education EFL Classrooms: Instructors' Insights on Differentiated Instruction in the Context of KUE

Getachew Baye

Target Audience/Actors: University Administration, Colleges (specially, College of Language Education) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE)

Scope: Higher Education EFL Context, Kotebe University of Education

Executive Summary

This policy briefing translates the findings of the study conducted at Kotebe University of Education (KUE) into actionable points by University leadership and educational stakeholders. The policy briefing is framed based on international standards. The study examined the KUE EFL instructors' perceptions of implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI), the extent to which it is employed in the classroom and the challenges the practitioners often face. Though DI is widely advocated as an inclusive and learner-centered pedagogical approach particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, its practical enactment remains languished tightening by several systemic and infrastructural barriers such as rigid curricula, time constraints, large and heterogeneous classes, limited technological and institutional support, absence of national proficiency benchmarks, and inadequate professional development. The findings revealed that while instructors demonstrate strong conceptual understanding and positive attitudes toward DI, its classroom implementation is minimal and inconsistent. The research also indicated that while instructors value learner-centered approaches, actual classroom sessions remain predominantly teacher-led. Thus, despite a high level of theoretical awareness and positive attitudes among EFL instructors at KUE, the practical application of DI remains at an infant implementation stage which demands a shift from talk to action for the required changes to happen in education. The analysis of legal documents also accentuated that there is a gap in policy framework which enforces the DI implementation. To sum up, the rigid systemic barriers and resource constraints have become the primary inhibitors of the proper implementation of DI and, hence this policy briefing is framed to enact a shift toward a system-supported differentiated instructional model.

1. Introduction

The paradigm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction is undergoing significant shifts, particularly in higher education. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, educators are pressed to adopt teaching approaches that address the varying needs, abilities, and learning preferences of students. Differentiated instruction, a pedagogical strategy that tailors teaching to meet these diverse learner profiles, has gained attention in recent years as a means to foster more equitable and effective learning environments (Tomlinson & Moon, 2023). However, the extent of this approach's adoption and its overall efficacy in higher education – specifically within contexts like Kotebe University of Education (KUE) – remains unclear. This gap warrants focused attention to achieve the desired institutional transformations. Consequently, KUE needs to assert its decisive role as the nation's flagship university of education by conducting rigorous research and producing evidence-based policy briefings.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) aims to optimize learning by providing students with diverse pathways to access contents, process ideas, and demonstrate understanding (Tomlinson, 2017). The approach is grounded in constructivist learning theories, which prioritize addressing students' unique cognitive and affective needs (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012). Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context – where learners often exhibit significant disparities in proficiency, pacing, and motivation – DI offers a robust framework for enhancing both student engagement and academic achievement (Heacox, 2020).

Despite its theoretical appeal, empirical evidence indicates that the implementation of differentiated instruction in higher education EFL classrooms is often problematic. Instructors frequently encounter significant hurdles, including time constraints, scarcity of resources, and insufficient training to tailor their pedagogy effectively (Santangelo, 2022). Furthermore, instructors may face resistance from students accustomed to traditional, 'one-size-fits-all' instructional model (Subban, 2023). In Ethiopian context, systemic obstacles such as overcrowded classrooms compound these challenges and limited instructional materials, which further impede the successful adoption of differentiated instruction in higher education (Teklehaimanot, 2023).

KUE, as a key institution in teacher education, is at the forefront of preparing future educators to navigate these challenges. Understanding the current practices, challenges, and perceived impacts of differentiated instruction in KUE's EFL classrooms is crucial for informing policy reforms and teacher training programs that promote more inclusive and student-centered teaching practices in language instruction context. Regardless of individual efforts to implement DI, a significant gap persists between the theory of DI, and its practical application in university settings (Roberts & Inman, 2024). The current study explored the extent of differentiated instruction adoption in KUE, the challenges faced by instructors, and its perceived impact on student engagement during the 2024-2025 academic year. In addition, it proposed an actionable policy framework to bridge the gap identified.

2. Policy Problems

Higher education classrooms in Ethiopia are remarkably heterogeneous, featuring students with diverse English proficiency levels, learning styles, and academic readiness. Implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) is essential to addressing these needs, as it tailors instructional contents, processes and approaches to the individual learner. Conversely, the predominant 'one-size-fits-all' approach leads to student disengagement and suboptimal learning outcomes. By limiting opportunities for peer-to-peer and student-to-materials interaction, this traditional approach forces students to remain dependent on teacher-led lectures. The study investigated there is a sharp contrast between what instructors say they do (*scaffolding, flexible grouping*) and what is observed (*lecture-based, punitive management and lack of student reflection*). This dependency further erodes the quality of higher education and, in language instruction specifically, stunts the development English proficiency. Furthermore, rigid adherence to standardized course outlines, shortage of ICT infrastructure and inclusive instructional materials in the classrooms, and absence of training on how to adopt and practically apply DI were found to be the major barriers to effectively implement DI. Within the KUE context, although instructors hold advanced degrees (MA/PhD) in English Language Teaching (ELT), they lack formal training in the enactment of 21st century DI. Therefore, this policy framework bridges existing gaps if properly enforced by relevant stakeholders.

3. Opportunities of DI in Transforming ELT at Higher Education Level

The implementation Differentiated Instruction is appreciated for its practical advantages in meeting diversified individual student needs. The following table presents DI implementation stakeholder responsibility matrix.

Table 1: Stakeholder Responsibility Matrix for implementing DI

| Stakeholder | Primarily Responsibility | Core DI Principle | Key Implementation Action | Proponents |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Administrator | Structural support | Creating learning environment | Provides common planning time and budgets for diverse tiered resources | Tomlinson (2014) |
| Instructional Coach | Pedagogical guidance | Process differentiation | Models tiered lesson and scaffolding techniques for struggling teacher | Knight (2007) |
| Classroom Teacher | Direct delivery | Ongoing assessment | Continuously assesses readiness to group students' flexibility. | Tomlinson & Moon (2017) |
| Special Educator | Inclusion strategy | Modification vs. accommodation | Collaborates on individualized education programs within | Friend & Cook (2016) |
| Student | Self-regulation | Agency & interest | Tracks personal growth and chooses materials that demonstrate mastery | Hattie (2012) |
| Curriculum Expert | Resource alignment | Content differentiation | Curates multi-level texts and tools mapped to state standards | Hockett (2011) |

4. Challenges of DI Implementation

The transition from traditional 'one-size-fits-all' teaching to personalized learning is not easy. This transition is possibly difficult because it requires a complete shift in teacher mindset and classroom management. Table 2 below stipulates challenges faced in implementing DI.

Table 2: Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI)

| Challenge | Description | Proponents |
|---------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Time constraints | The extensive time required for lesson planning, creating multiple tiered assignments, and assessing diverse outputs. | Tomlinson (2017) |
| Assessment pressure | The conflict between individualized instruction and the rigid requirements of standardized, high-stakes testing. | Sousa & Tomlinson (2018) |
| Resource Scarcity | Lack of access to varied reading levels, digital tools, or physical space to facilitate small-group rotations. | Bondie et al. (2019) |
| Inadequate training | Professional development that is theoretical rather than providing practical, in-the-classroom strategies. | Suprayogi et al. (2017) |
| Class Size | Managing 30+ students with vast ranges in readiness, language proficiency, and behavioral needs. | Hattie & Clarke (2018) |
| Teacher Efficacy | The psychological barrier where teachers feel they lack the skill to manage a decentralized classroom. | Dixon et al. (2014) |

5. Policy Recommendations

In cognizant of its potential benefit, DI is recommended for it ensures inclusiveness, and treats students based on their individual needs. Teachers should focus on designing tasks at different levels of complexity so every student is appropriately challenged, ensuring the lower-level task just as engaging and essential as the advanced task.

Table 3: DI Implementation Matrix: Policy, Action, and Strategy

| Category | Component | Implementation Strategy |
|-----------------|---|--|
| Policy | Mandated professional developmental and framework | Establishing standards for DI; integrating DI into teacher evaluation rubrics; providing structured professional development rather than one-off workshops |
| | Resource allocation | Funding for assistive technologies, varied reading materials (multi-level texts), and flexible classroom furniture to support grouping |
| Key Actions | Ongoing assessment | Using formative and pre-assessments to group students by readiness rather than static ability. |
| | Instructional Tiering | Designing tiered activities where all students work toward the same learning goal but at different levels of complexity. |
| Opportunities | Students engagement | Higher intrinsic motivation as tracks align with student interests and learning profiles (e.g., kinesthetic vs. visual) |
| | Equity & inclusion | Bridges the gaps for English language learners (ELL) and special education students within the general classroom setting. |
| Challenges | Time & planning | Teachers often struggle to find time to create multiple lesson versions for a single class period. |
| | Systemic | High-stake testing often pressures teachers to return to |

resistance standardized, frontal teaching to cover the syllabus.

6. Conclusion

The transformation of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom at KUE from teacher-centered to student-responsive environment is not merely a pedagogical choice, but also a necessity for equitable education. By removing the structural bottlenecks of rigid curriculum and lack of resources, KUE can move from theoretical excellence to practical leadership in Ethiopian higher education realm.

7. References

- Bondie, R., Dahnke, C., & Zusho, A. (2019). How does changing “one-size-fits-all” to differentiated instruction affect teaching? *Review of Research in Education*, 43(1), 336–362. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18821130>
- Dixon, F. A., Yssel, N., McConnell, J. M., & Hardin, T. (2014). Differentiated instruction, professional development, and teacher efficacy. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 37(2), 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162353214529042>
- Friend, M., & Cook, L. (2016). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*. Routledge.
- Hattie, J., & Clarke, S. (2018). *Visible learning: Feedback*. Routledge.
- Heacox, D. (2020). *Differentiated instruction in the regular classroom: How to reach and teach all learners*. Free Spirit Publishing.
- Hockett, J. A. (2011). *Effective curriculum for underserved gifted students*. Prufrock Press.
- Knight, J. (2007). *Instructional coaching: A partnership approach to improving instruction*. Corwin Press.
- Roberts, L. M., & Inman, D. E. (2024). Bridging the gap between theory and practice: Challenges in implementing differentiated instruction in university classrooms. *Journal of Higher Education Pedagogy*, 21(1), 28–44. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/jhep.2024.xxx>
- Roberts, J. L., & Inman, T. F. (2024). *Strategies for differentiating instruction: Best practices for the classroom* (4th ed.). Routledge.

- Santangelo, T. (2022). Challenges in implementing differentiated instruction: Teacher time constraints, resource limitations, and professional preparation needs. *Journal of Educational Practice and Pedagogy*, 14(2), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/jepp>
- Santangelo, T., & Tomlinson, C. A. (2012). Teacher educators' perceptions of differentiated instruction. *Action in Teacher Education*, 34(4), 309–327.
- Sousa, D. A., & Tomlinson, C. A. (2018). *Differentiation and the brain: How neuroscience supports the learner-friendly classroom* (2nd ed.). Solution Tree Press; ASCD.
- Subban, P. (2023). Differentiation and engagement in EFL classrooms. *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, 11(2), 71–89.
- Suprayogi, M. N., Valcke, M., & Godwin, R. (2017). Teachers and their implementation of differentiated instruction in the classroom. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 67, 291–301. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.06.020>
- Teklehaimanot, G. T. (2023). Contextual challenges affecting the implementation of differentiated instruction in Ethiopian higher education: Class size, instructional resources, and teaching practices. *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Pedagogical Studies*, 17(1), 63–79.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2017). *How to differentiate instruction in academically diverse classrooms* (3rd ed.). ASCD.
- Tomlinson, C. A., & Moon, T. R. (2017). *Assessment and student success in a differentiated classroom*. ASCD.