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English Language Teachers' Perceptions and Actual Classroom Practices of Differentiated Instruction: General Secondary and Preparatory School in FocusZewudie Tamiru¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ferret out English language teachers' perceptions, and to compare with that of their actual classroom practices of differentiated instruction. To achieve this goal, an exploratory type of case study was employed. Grade 11 English language teachers of Bahir Dar TanaHaik General Secondary and Preparatory Schools were selected as participants using a comprehensive sampling technique. Interview and observation were utilized to gather data and the results were analyzed qualitatively particularly through describing what was really happening in the classrooms and narrating their responses. The findings indicated that the interviewees had positive perceptions about differentiated instruction, but they did not practice it. Teachers' less use of the strategies may be attributed to their limited knowledge of differentiated instruction, lack of commitment, time constraint and large class size. Finally, in light of the findings, recommendations were forwarded.

Keywords: /Content Differentiation/Learning Environment Differentiation/Process Differentiation/ Product Differentiation/

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Educators all over the world recognize that students do not learn in the same way. Students rather have multiple ways of learning and processing information. This requires teachers to think of an alternative to one-size-fits of kind of instruction where it primarily addresses the needs of average learners. Differentiated instruction (DI here after), as an alternative to one-size-fits all instruction, is a pedagogical approach to teach students who are different in their readiness levels, interests, pace or rate of learning and learning profiles within the same classroom (Stradling & Saunders, 1993). The authors hold the belief that DI is “the process of matching learning targets, tasks, activities, resources, and learning support to individual learners’ needs, styles and rates of learning” (Stradling & Saunders, 1993, p.129).

Tomlinson (1999), a pioneer in DI, suggests that the ultimate aim of DI is to maximize each student’s academic success by meeting each student where he/she is at the time and assisting or scaffolding him/her to reach the expected proficiency level in the learning process. In language teaching, Scanlon (2011) underlines the fact that providing appropriate instruction has impact on students’ acquiring language skills. The author claims that for instance, most reading problems occur due to the failure of instruction to meet the needs of learners (Scanlon, 2011). Hence, as an alternative to one-size-fits all instruction, DI is believed to be helpful in catering the needs of high, average and slow learners including gifted and disadvantaged once. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to find out teachers’ perceptions and actual classroom practices of DI and impeding factors effecting the implementations of DI in Ethiopian EFL classrooms particularly in TanaHaik General Secondary and Preparatory School at Bahir Dar.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Every learner has his/her own learning style, linguistic background knowledge or individual pace of learning and developing. Similarly, the majority of English as foreign language classes involve students of varying abilities (Richards, 1998). It is true that students’ capacity is different. Some of them are at the top level, some are medium and some of them are poor academically. In today’s learner-centered approach, every teacher differentiates the instruction in one or another way as some studies have indicated (by giving tutorial, using active learning methods and continuous assessment) and all these are intended to identify students gaps and to assist them according to their needs although they are not practicing in a systematic manner as the present researcher observed.

Thus, as the researcher’s personal experience, personal readings, and informal discussions made with colleagues show, there is no appropriate response on the part of teachers in addressing students’ diversified needs. However, there should be a planned and systematic way of delivering lessons to differentiate the content, the process and the product of learning cater to the needs of students. In the Ethiopian context, DI might be a better way of narrowing the achievement gap of students at any level because there is no homogeneity among any group of students rather they are distinct at least in some ways.

Therefore, to assist students to use their potentials and to teach them based on their needs and capabilities, the researcher believes that implementing DI could help.

Currently, in the Ethiopian context, all schools and universities at any level are obliged to follow a learner-centered approach of teaching. This implies that all teachers at any level are expected to account for the needs of students. Concerning this, Borko, Mayfield, Marion, Flexer, and Cumbo (1997) pointed out that in a student-centered classroom, teachers use a wide variety of instructional strategies and approaches to scaffold learning to ensure that each student acquires the knowledge necessary to achieve understanding. Thus, if this is the case, the question is, are today's schools differentiating instructions to address the diverse needs and interests of students? Having this concern in mind, the researcher intended to investigate teachers' perceptions and classroom practices of implementing DI in heterogeneous classrooms.

In connection with DI, as far as the researcher's reading is concerned, although there are studies conducted at a global level, almost all of them conducted at primary school level. For instance, Stewart (2016) carried out a study entitled "Teachers' Perceptions of Differentiated Instruction in Elementary Reading." He came to conclude that in many elementary schools in Florida, teachers have positive perceptions about DI and apply different DI strategies.

With regard to local studies, as far as the researcher's readings are concerned, there are only a few studies that deal with DI. For instance, Abate (2013) studied the effects of DI on students' vocabulary achievement and attitude towards vocabulary learning and instruction. Tadesse (2015) studied the perceptions, practices, and challenges of primary school teachers toward DI. The findings of Tadesse's study indicated that primary school teachers who attended their Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching (PGDT) programme at Bahir Dar University (BDU) had poor conceptions about DI and they followed the traditional one-size-fits-all approach for all the subjects given at schools. Nevertheless, as the researcher mentioned earlier, now a days, in her workplace, many teachers complain that students are not qualified to fit for their level especially in English and she thought it might be a better idea to see how these students were treated at preparatory school before they join university. Therefore, in this particular study, the researcher employed observation to look into how DI was actually going on in classrooms and to fill the previous research gaps at TanaHaik General Secondary and Preparatory School. Thus, this study examined English language teachers' perceptions and classroom practices of DI as well as the possible deterring factors that hinder the implementation of DI in EFL classrooms by answering the following research questions:

1. How do English language teachers perceive DI?
2. What kinds of differentiated instructions do English language teachers employ in the actual classrooms?
3. What are the challenges of implementing DI in EFL classrooms?

2. Review of Related Literature

In this section, the relevant literature which incorporates the need for DI, mechanisms to make it feasible, critical elements of DI, strategies employed to differentiate instruction and conceptual frame work of the study will be discussed briefly.

2.1 The Need for Differentiated Instruction

Regarding how learners learn, scholars have proved that individuals do not learn in the same way (Green, 1999; Fischer & Rose, 2001). Following this, the current state of the art in education has been influenced by several renowned theorists who have investigated the different methods learners use to conceptualize ideas and argue that DI is a viable alternative to traditional teaching. It offers students the options of moving on to more complex material once they have mastered certain key skills; it assists the teacher to be a more dynamic, competent, creative, and professional educator. In addition to these, it also creates a purposeful learning environment that maximizes opportunities for meaningful learning to take place (Brooks, 2004).

If EFL/ESL teachers differentiate instructions by adjusting the contents or by employing different strategies, students having diversified needs, different language proficiencies or linguistic differences and special needs students could be benefited. This is because DI enables teachers to know the learners' strong and weak points and to help them enhance and strengthen the strong ones as well as to assist them to overcome the weak ones when given specific/differentiated instruction. In this regard, Hallahan, Kauffman, and Pullen (2000) assert that one of the foremost reasons that initiated the use of DI is the presence of special needs students who should get special attention. They claim that teaching these students using the traditional methods is almost ineffective as their learning profiles might also vary as per their illness.

Hence, as far as there is variability among a class of students, using a traditional, one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective not only for special needs but also for all students. Sapon-Shevin (2000/2001) pinpoints that apart from students identified as having learning problems, a classroom usually composed of mixed ability students sit side by side. Some of them include highly advanced learners; students whose first language is not English, students who underachieve, students from diverse cultures, economic backgrounds, or both; students of both genders, and students who are motivated and unmotivated. Thus, to accommodate all these diversities in a single classroom, there is a need to create awareness in all educational institutions about the significance of DI.

Therefore, providing students multiple avenues for learning is an excellent opportunity for EFL learners to master the contents of the language and to develop their language skills as well as proficiency in the language. This is because brain-research, research on multiple intelligence, and learning styles all confirmed that all human beings possess different abilities and need different ways of learning. If EFL/ESL teachers create this golden opportunity for their students, that is, if teachers consider students' multiple intelligences and design activities differently as per students' different predominant intelligences, learners' motivation and interest for language learning will be enhanced (Gardner, 2006). Regarding the role EFL/ESL teachers should play to assist learners,

Rodriguez (2012, p.20) advises them “to practice intentional differentiation of instruction and assessment”.

2.2 Ways to Differentiate Instruction

Levy, (2008) describes that there are different ways where teachers differentiate instruction in one way or another. For instance, allowing more class time to finish an assignment, giving choices of which book to read and mixing up the different types of assignments given throughout the week could be mentioned. Levy underlines that they are all ways to differentiate instruction; however, they are not individually responsive to student needs. Thus, Levy (2008) recommends that teachers must be flexible to create such a learning environment and they should be aware of differentiating instruction to address these differences by giving due attention to the following most prevalent ways of differentiating instruction:

Readiness. It refers to the learners' determination of their current performance level. It is about their preparedness to the contents they are going to learn. This will be boosted if the tasks and activities designed are closely related to the students' skills and interests. The concept of readiness is linked with Vygotsky's ZPD and Krashen's “i+1” theory. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that the tasks given to the learners must be within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This is because true learning occurs in this zone. He defines ZPD as the gap between what an individual/a learner can do by him/herself and what he/she can do with the assistance of the peers or teachers or any capable person. Consequently, for the learners to work within this zone, the tasks should be neither too easy nor too challenging rather they should be a little beyond the learners level of understanding (i+1) (Krashen, 1982) where the “i” is about the knowledge that students already have and “+1” is the new knowledge which should be presented in a manageable manner considering the level and capacity of students.

Interest. Learners' motivation towards a certain topic is different depending upon their interests. If the tasks arouse learners' curiosity, learners make connections between the new learning with the previous experiences and in that case, they will find the contents appealing, intriguing, relevant and worthwhile. Studies asserted that interest-based instruction is linked to motivation and it appears to promote positive impacts on learning (Tobias, 1994; Renninger, 1998). Adapting the instruction in light of the interest of students is essential to boost their engagement, to enhance their intrinsic motivation, and to develop their creativity.

Learning profile. Learning profile refers to learners' preferred mode of learning that can be affected by numerous factors including learning style (being auditory, visual or kinesthetic) and intelligence which all learners possess but in different ways. Learners may possess eight or more intelligences that include verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, naturalistic and existential intelligences; gender and even cultural differences also affect the learners' preference of the best possible way of learning (Dunn, 1996). Everyone has his/her own way of acquiring the contents.

2.3 What to Differentiate?

According to Tomlinson (1999), the following four elements are very crucial to differentiate instruction according to the learners' preferred needs. These are content, process, product and classroom environment.

Differentiating the Content (what is to be taught). In any classroom, it is assumed that there is inconsistency among a class of students in terms of their age, gender/sex, background, readiness, interests, intelligences and others. Having these diversified needs into account; teachers should vary the contents/topics accordingly. Hence, modifying the content/ refers to the modification of what teachers teach (the curriculum). This is because some students in a class may be completely unfamiliar with the content/topic presented in a specific lesson, some of them may have partial mastery, and some students may already be familiar with the content before the lesson begins.

Differentiating the Process (how to teach). Differentiation came up with the idea that there is no uniformity among any group of students. Teachers should vary not only what they plan to teach but also how they present the contents and this actually refers to the process of learning. Everyone has a unique way of acquiring the content and this differs depending on his/her preferred learning style—visual, auditory and kinesthetic— as well as their intelligence—some students may have stronger interpersonal intelligences and they may choose to work in pairs or groups than those whose intrapersonal intelligences are high. As a result, teachers need to identify students learning profile first to enhance their learning by offering support in line with the learners' individual needs.

Differentiating the Product (what the students produce at the end). In a differentiated classroom, students have given the opportunity to produce what they have done or mastered in a range of possible ways in light of their preferences. What the students produce at the end of the lesson to demonstrate the mastery of the contents is known as the product. Students might be given the option of rewriting the story having a different ending, preparing oral presentation or writing a portfolio on a certain topic. Generally, assessment as learning which can be performed in the form of students' reflection or journal writing and ongoing assessment in the form of quizzes, tests, projects, reports, presentations, debates, and others can be taken as the various ways students show their understanding of the contents (Tomlinson, 2001).

Differentiating the Classroom Environment. The classroom environment which comprises of the physical layout of the classroom, the way the teacher uses the space, environmental elements including lighting, as well as the overall atmosphere of the classroom should be supportive for students to motivate them for learning. In language teaching, for example, language teaching methods like Suggestopedia also support the notion of creating a conducive environment for optimal learning to take place.

2.4 Strategies used to Differentiate Instruction

Differentiation incorporates various instructional strategies such as curriculum compacting, tiered assignments, learning contracts, independent study/work, flexible grouping, scaffolding and others (Tomlinson, 2003). For instance, in compacting the curriculum, a teacher assesses the curriculum or the textbook so as to fit it with students' needs. He/she assesses what a student knew and what he/she still needs to master. It may

involve upgrading the challenge level of the curriculum or eliminating the content or skills that are already acquired by students (Tomlinson, 2003).

2.5 Conceptual Frame work

The conceptual framework of the study demonstrates the major concepts the study relies on. Figure1 shows EFL teachers' practices on the issue of DI which embraces adjustment of the content/the lessons taught, the process/the mode of delivery of the contents, the product/the means teachers check students' mastery of the skills and the classroom environment to make the learning free from stress. Hence, EFL teachers' perceptions of the various dimensions of DI were checked against their actual classroom practices.

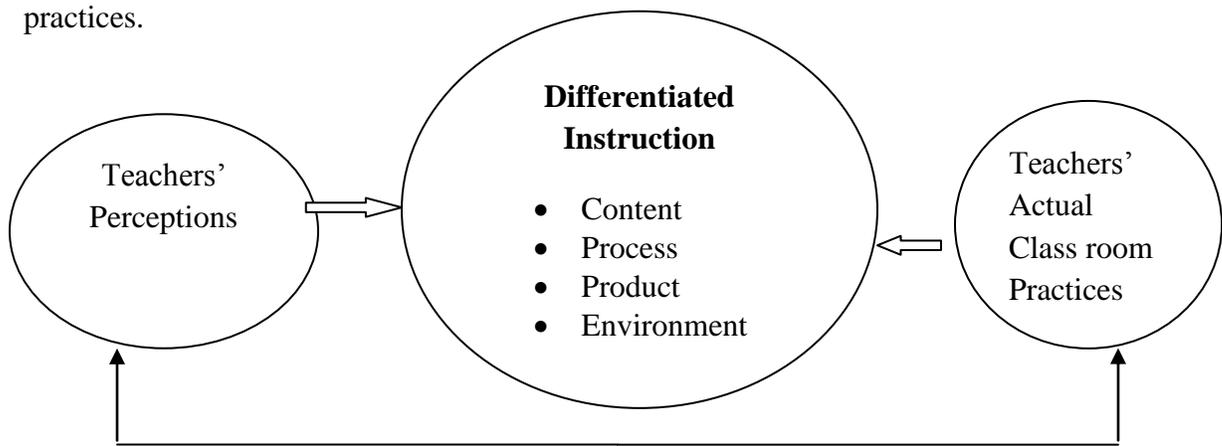


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Adapted from Hall, 2004)

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The design of the study was a case study which is exploratory in its nature. The case of TanaHaik General Secondary and Preparatory School was taken as a group case and investigated. To explore the teachers' perceptions and to find out the challenges experienced, interview was employed and to further check how DI was implemented in EFL classrooms, observations were conducted. It was a qualitative study through which the researcher has tried to grasp data from the research participants. As Creswell (2013) describes, in qualitative research, researchers make multiple meanings of the experiences of individuals through gathering open-ended information with the purpose of developing themes from the data. Merriam (2009) also explains that in qualitative research, researchers seek to understand the meaning people have constructed about the issue, and how they make sense of the thing they want to investigate.

3.2 Participants and Sampling Techniques

With regard to the research participants, EFL teachers were the participants of the study. There were four EFL teachers who were assigned to teach English as a subject for grade 11 in the academic year 2015/16, in Bahir Dar, at TanaHaik General Secondary and Preparatory School, and all of them were chosen as the participants of the study. As the number of participants was manageable, the researcher found a comprehensive sampling technique more convenient.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Interview. Semi-structured interview was conducted with teachers to check their perceptions about DI and how they practiced it in the actual classroom contexts. The interview involves questions about the types of students available in the classrooms aimed to get in what ways students are different; whether or not they believe that teaching and evaluating all students in the same way is fair or not. Besides, it also includes questions related to the mechanisms the teachers employed to know students' readiness, interest and learning profiles; teaching strategies and evaluations techniques employed to teach students having multifaceted preferences and similar other questions were forwarded which were intended to get about the big picture i.e., teachers' perceptions and classroom practices of DI without necessarily mentioning the philosophy of DI.

Observation. To assess the differentiated strategies implemented in the actual classrooms and to check whether what the teachers perceived and told during the interview was actually implemented, classroom observation was conducted. Classes were observed after preparing focus areas for observation adapted from Chapman and King's (2005) classroom observation checklist, but the researcher modified the lists in a qualitative form. The researcher observed eight sessions with each EFL teachers. The intention was to see whether EFL teachers did what they perceived before to make the lesson a better fit for the needs of mixed ability students.

3.4 Transferability and Dependability of the Data Gathering Instruments

Although there is no application of statistical methods used in qualitative research unlike the quantitative one, there is still a way to ensure the transferability and/or dependability or the trustworthiness of the data gathered. To that end, semi-structured interview questions and observation questions were checked by three TEFL and psychology instructors. Comments related to EFL teachers' knowledge of DI, the number of interview questions, the focus area of observation and similar comments were suggested and considered before data collection. For instance, instead of asking what is meant by DI, the researcher considered comments and reframed the questions in a way that addresses the issue of DI indirectly.

3.5 Data Gathering Procedures

Before the data collection, first, the researcher got a letter from the department of English at BDU. Then, she went to the school and met English language teachers and the vice director. Next, she talked to the vice director and grade 11 English teachers about

the purpose of the research and the confidentiality of the information gathered. After that, she fixed programmes first for the interview and then for classroom observations. Then, the interview was carried out. Finally, she observed classes; took detailed notes of every activity that was done in the classroom including teachers' and students' rapport and reactions.

3.6 Data Analysis

The information gathered was analyzed qualitatively using words. As mentioned earlier, teachers were interviewed based on guiding questions and from their responses, the researcher also raised related questions. For the purposes of the analysis, all the questions were categorized into those related to content, process, product and learning environment and the data were analyzed and interpreted thematically. The data through classroom observation were first organized into themes. After coding, the topics covered were identified (the content) or the contents of the lesson(s) were written; then, the teacher and the students' roles were written; the techniques or the strategies of teaching the contents were also identified; the students and the teacher's interaction, the classroom atmosphere were seen and finally what the teacher (s) did and how the students demonstrated what they were supposed to master were pointed out. In general, in this study, qualitative methods of data analysis involving thematic analysis for the interview and narrative approach for observation were employed.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Results

As stated above in the methodology section, interview and observation were the two data gathering tools utilized in this study. Interview was chosen to assess mainly the participants' perceptions on DI and how they thought they use it in the classroom. As the participants were few in number (4), interview was convenient than other data gathering tools like questionnaire. On the other hand, to check whether or not what they perceived about DI was practiced in the actual classroom, observation was held to capture what was really going on in the actual setting.

Interview. As mentioned earlier, interview was carried out to find out EFL teachers' perceptions and challenges they faced to implement DI in EFL classrooms. The interview was analyzed in five themes. This include themes regarding the participants' perceptions of DI, the way they adjust the contents, deliver the contents to vary instruction and demonstrate students' understanding on the lessons learned and the challenges they faced in doing these things. The data obtained from the interview showed that almost all teachers had limited knowledge about the concept of DI although they felt that it is very vital. For instance, teacher one (T1) reported that:

The term DI means to put something into different categories, and in teaching, there are students who have different abilities, but I do not use it because it is difficult.

Another interviewer, T4, stated his perceptions of DI in this way:

I know DI from CPD training, but assigning students in different classrooms as high and low achievers is not good for their psychology.

As T4 said in verbatim, he got training about DI from CPD, but, it seems that, his conception of DI was limited to one phase of differentiation. That is, one way of differentiating students is through their capability by considering their classroom achievement high, average and low achieving students. This is one way of differentiating instruction. It has its own positive and negative impacts on students, but one can also differentiate instruction using students' readiness, learning profile or interest or any other parameters.

In general, from the interviewees' responses, it is possible to conclude that the interviewees had positive perceptions of DI. They claimed that it is one of the means to address the issue of quality education. T3 reflected the following statement in this regard:

If we teach students using all our potentials in a way that makes suitable for all types of students in a classroom, today's big concern that is quality of education would be addressed properly.

With regard to the participants' reactions on the adjustment of contents and strategies employed and the way they checked students' understanding in the classroom to make instruction a better fit for students, for instance, T3 stated that:

I have been employing some of the ELT teaching methods in my classroom to make all students to work in collaboration. For example, I use group work and presentation to give them a chance to interact one another.

Some interviewees appeared to lose hope by their learners' ability, and they had rather compared students at present with the previous once. They felt that whatever support they give for the students, or whether or not they adjust the contents or use different strategies, there will be no change or the students may not produce a single paragraph correctly in English as they did not have the motivation to learn. T4 reported the following in this regard:

These days, many students do not spend time to read; they do not read in the library; they do not challenge teachers; they rather wanted to enjoy and get good marks by any means They are not worried about getting knowledge. For these kinds of unmotivated learners, asking teachers to prepare different tasks is simply a burden.

In a similar vein, T2 said:

I know that there are four types of students. For example, in my classroom, there are high, average, low achievers and special needs students. I have tried to help all by using simple words for the low achievers and to assist to read and write for the blind ones, but I do not necessarily prepare different homework and assignments. This is because, as you know, teachers' salary is low. We are

worried about payment for the house rent and other household affairs, and we teach many periods and we are very busy for the whole week, so how do we expect to prepare different compatible activities for different students?

Thus, from the overall responses of the participants, it is possible to infer that their perceptions were positive even if they failed to apply the principles of DI in the actual classrooms.

The other question raised for the interviewees was about the hindrances that make the implementation of DI difficult. For this question, different responses were suggested by the interviewees. However, most of them are related. Large class size, time constraint, lack of commitment and motivation because of insufficient payment, job dissatisfaction due to unmotivated learners, workload and so on were reported as deterring factors for the absence of DI in EFL contexts in the selected sections.

Classroom Observation. As mentioned in the methodology section, observation aimed at observing English language teachers' classroom practices. That is, to see if EFL teachers deliver lessons in a way that responds to the needs of the students or whether or not teachers adapt the content, the process, the product and the learning environment. Therefore, observation on the teachers' side focused on answering questions that ask teachers if they respond to the needs of the students by different methods like re-teaching, presenting the same content through various modalities and in different forms like individually, in pairs as well as in small group and large groups. In a similar vein, observations on the students part also incorporate questions/ indicators that ensures whether teachers communicate objectives with students to explain what and how students do each activities, rapport between teachers with students and students with students, and allow students to work based on their preferences and their paces.

As stated above, observation was conducted to assess the practice of DI in EFL/ESL classrooms in Bahir Dar at TanaHaik General Secondary and Preparatory Schools. Concerning the results of the observations carried out with the four English language teachers, in teacher one (T1) class, for example, one of the lessons was about passive voice. The teacher, after introducing the daily lesson by providing one example, he let the students work on the activities from the textbook in groups. Then, he moved to the class and checked on their work. After some time, he asked randomly some students to respond. Next, the teacher wrote two different exercises on the blackboards which ask students to change active into passive voice and vice-versa. The class continued like this. Likewise, the rest of the T1 classes as well as other teachers' classes focused much on grammar and doing homework particularly for the reading and writing sections. The reason that they gave reading and writing activities as homework is because as teachers replied, grade 11 English textbook is very bulky and there was no time to cover the material within the academic year.

In addition to dealing with the grammar part of the text, for instance, in T3 classes, students were given different topics from the text book and they were asked to present what they prepared about the topic. For example, a student came up with a piece of paper and wrote the topic present perfect. Then, he identified the form of present perfect tense and then gave sentence examples about the uses. The teacher interrupted the student to check whether he understood or not and asked the meanings of the sentences; he also invited the class to participate in answering the questions.

During the observation, almost all teachers mainly used group work, whole-class discussion, individual presentation, and loud reading. Nevertheless, the teachers used those ELT methods simply to create variety without deliberate differentiation. This was checked during interview as many of them reported that they asked the students to work in groups simply because they knew this technique earlier to assist their learners to work together and to learn from each other, but this was done without even giving adequate time depending on the pace of different group of learners to help them to learn in a variety of ways by creating multiple options for learning.

From the classroom observation, the researcher also realized that no special support was offered by the teachers for the visually impaired students, and these students were treated like their peers. For instance, in the T4 class, the teacher asked two students to read aloud the passage about 'NGOs in Ethiopia' that had been given as homework. Then, he randomly asked students to answer reading comprehension questions and vocabulary questions. Here, two points were being observed. One thing, the teacher stood next to the board and he did not even round to check the students' homework and to help at least visually impaired students. The teacher simply asked questions without even giving time for those who did not read the reading text at home. The other point was, although asking all students to participate was a good thing and to provide chance only for a few who raised their hands was inadequate, the way the teacher asked questions made the classroom environment frustrating.

4.2 Discussions

As aforementioned in the results section, the participants used mainly whole class discussion, group work, and pair work. Research also supports a similar approach to present lessons in a differentiated classroom. It indicates that DI involves a blend of a whole-class, small group, and independent learning (Blaz, 2006). This indicates that differentiated strategies do not necessarily imply only individual instruction and it is possible to vary the process of instruction by using the techniques that the teachers used as stated. In fact, the teachers reported that they did not intentionally use those methods in a way that was pre-planned to address the diversified needs of the learners. In this regard, Hobson's (2008) study also revealed that many teachers were not actually following differentiation, but simply implementing what they thought was good to improve students' achievement. However, Tomlinson (2000) recommends deliberate use of differentiation as it shows teachers how to teach the same standard to a range of learners by employing a variety of teaching and learning modes.

Although special attention was not given for the observed visually impaired students, there should be something different in at least the time given for the students whenever special needs students are included in the inclusive classrooms. However, teachers during the interview reported that they used simplified languages to make the lessons understood by all students. In relation to differentiating the lesson when there is the inclusion of special needs students in the classroom, Tomlinson (2005) asserts that having special needs students at school is one of the reasons to differentiate instructions. Therefore, teachers have to recognize learners' variance and treat them accordingly even if almost all teachers in this study ignored these individual differences and treated all as if they learned in the same way. In this regard, Gardner (2006) argues that the biggest

mistake in teaching is to treat all children as if they were variants of the same individual and to feel justified in teaching all students in the same way. Nevertheless, from the researcher's observation, she confirmed that all students had been given the same kinds of activities, and they were even supposed to finish at an equal pace.

Many other researchers such as Joseph, Ramscook, Simonette, and Thomas (2013) also support Gardner's argument and state that many teachers teach and assess every student in the same way using the same material without paying attention to learners' variance. However, teachers should consciously adjust curriculum and instruction in response to student interests, readiness, and learning profile. The authors explain that Vygotsky(1978) recommends teachers to teach within a student's zone of proximal development (ZPD). The same writers also emphasize the significance of considering students ZPD and understanding student learning preferences. They point out that understanding how students demonstrate their IQ level may help to meet the specific learning needs more appropriately and to bridge their learning gaps using ZPD. One of the means to accomplish this is to emphasize DI not only as an instructional strategy but also as a critical teaching and learning philosophy (Joseph, Ramscook, Simonette Thomas, 2013).

Concerning teachers' perceptions, as mentioned in the results section, although one of the interviewees perceived DI in relation to assigning students having different capabilities to different classes, DI does not necessarily involve this. Many researchers agreed that DI is rather implemented to support students of different learning backgrounds, different talents, and different learning preferences, but in the same classroom. In addition, it does not necessarily mean academically poor students always work with academically poor students. It may rather be mixed if the students have the same learning preferences or similar level of intelligence or shared interests regardless of their abilities. In this study, although most interviewees felt that DI seems vital, their knowledge about it was very limited. Hess's (1999) research finding is consistence with this study. He found that 90% of teachers do not know how to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability settings.

In relation to teachers' modification of DI components, although they believed that students have varied levels of proficiency and providing lessons accordingly is vital, because of several factors mentioned in the results section, they were reluctant to modify instruction to cater the needs of students. A few interviewees mentioned they gave chances to students to vary instruction by providing collaborative activities and individual presentations. However, scholars in the field underline teachers' responsibility of modifying especially the three areas of differentiation that is, content, process and product as per their students' readiness, interest and learning profile. Anderson (2007; Hall, 2009) indicate that teachers are required to modify particularly content, process and product in preparing a lesson to give appropriate classroom instruction for every learner despite the differences among them.

The interviewees also showed that they were blaming students in capabilities and carelessness as one of the reasons that made them demotivated in teaching. They claimed that students do not challenge teachers; students were reluctant to learn. Of course, it is a great challenge for teachers. However, the researcher argues that, if teachers think of

ways to alleviate these problems by designing activities that are manageable and challenging based on students' current level of performance in a way that tailors their needs, these problems could be minimized.

Concerning the challenges of implementing DI, the interviewees mentioned earlier that DI is daunting. Prominent scholars in the field also underline that implementing DI strategies is a challenge for teachers and due to this they prefer to teach in a one-size-fits-all approach even if they are aware of learners' strengths and weaknesses as well as their preferred mode of learning (Joshi & Verspoor, 2013). Hertberg-Davis (2009) also states that differentiation is unsuccessful due to time constraints and because it involves rigorous tasks. In relation to differentiating the lessons particularly for high school and preparatory school learners, Tomlinson (1995), on her part, states that it is difficult to differentiate instruction for middle school-aged learners. The use of DI is demanding; students have different needs, language barriers, learning abilities and achievement gaps (Tomlinson, 2005). However, she also reported that even though applying DI is demanding, teachers are responsible for their students and they need to do whatever they can for students to learn in a better way. In her view, teachers should be optimistic, enthusiastic, and vigorous to support their students as they pledged to the teaching profession (Tomlinson, 2005). Ayalew's (2009) in his study also emphasizes that the strength of any educational system largely depends on the quality and commitment of teachers. In addition, Bondley (2011) suggests that without proper planning of DI, teachers' workload may be increased and led them to become stressful.

Large class size is one of the most serious problems in most Ethiopian schools. Research shows that small group instruction is one of the powerful ways to differentiate instruction to lessen the problem of providing individual instruction in such situations (Tomlinson, 2005). The author also believes that the application of DI is challenging and time-consuming, but it is possible to implement it; what is needed is teachers' motivation and determination in practicing differentiation. Likewise, Palmer and Maag (2010) encourage teachers to address learners' needs using DI due to the fact that differentiation contributes to positive learning because learners are engaged and challenged in the classroom.

In general, the researcher believes that, even if Ethiopian teachers have a lot of burden and problems that make them feel dissatisfied in teaching, as far as they are teaching, it would be best if they devote time for their students to produce qualified citizens in all aspects. Hence, the researcher would like to emphasize strongly on teachers as they are the key for the change in education even with limited resources and large class size.

The study has limitations especially on the methodology section. That is, its depth and external validity would be better if data were taken from a large population. Similarly, because of the nature of the study which focused on selected grade level, the research participants were few. As a result of this, the study was purely qualitative. However, the mixed approach might help to triangulate the data and to get the participants' view in depth through questionnaire.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

Generally, the findings indicated that almost all the research participants' perceptions about DI was positive, but their application of DI was very limited. Pertaining to the differentiated strategies employed in the actual classrooms, the data obtained from the observation indicated that it was inadequate and even difficult to say that the teachers employed DI strategies rather they simply used ELT methods that they knew before and they utilized those without even varying the pace for visually impaired students. This result also coincides with the teachers' face to face interview. Lack of adequate training/knowledge about DI, lack of commitment and motivation because of insufficient payment, workload, and large class size were identified as challenges that make the application of DI in the English classrooms, which is a serious problem. To conclude, there is a discrepancy between what the contemporary literature says about DI and what was being practiced. That is the literature suggests that everywhere in the world students in the same classroom have different readiness, interests and learning profiles and teachers should adjust teaching to cater to these diversity. However, from the findings of the study, it is possible to deduce that although teachers' perceptions about DI were positive, lessons were not delivered based on the principles of DI or there was almost no practice.

5.2. Recommendations

In general, although the generalization of the study becomes problematic, the Ministry of Education (MoE) needs to organize and provide training for EFL teachers who teach English for Grade 11 on how to identify students' various needs, to adapt the textbook/activities in a way that caters to the diversified needs of students, to teach and to assess them flexibly based on students' readiness, interest and learning profiles.

The major recommendation would be for the MoE. If there is a willingness to change the Ethiopian quality of education, more than anything else, teachers are the key. They play a crucial role. Therefore, they ought to be paid well, and their workload should be minimized. The teaching profession needs to be respected and valued better.

As the findings showed, there was a disparity between EFL teachers' perceptions and actual classroom practices. This implied that although the teachers believed that DI is really essential to maximize the academic performance of students, they failed to practice it because of different deterring factors among which large class size is the most serious one. Therefore, the results of this study may suggest several implications for future research. The first one is on the differentiated strategies to be used in large class size and second on the effects of DI on EFL/ESL classrooms to make students successful language users/learners particularly for special needs students who need special attention so as to enrich them to use their potentials.

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