

# Toward Differentiated Assessment in a Public College in Oman

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## Abstract

Differentiated assessment (DA) seeks to address the individual differences between students and provides them with the appropriate assessment strategy. This paper looks into the possibility of implementing differentiated assessment in a public college in Oman. Additionally, it attempts to explore teachers' views about the possibility of implementing DA and to what extent do they support the idea of using DA and why. Further, it strives to identify some institutional, instructional and pedagogical challenges which might hinder the implementation of differentiated assessment and to find some best possible ways and strategies for implementing it in this context in question. A questionnaire was administered to 40 teachers to answer the study questions and to propose an assessment model on differentiated assessment. The results revealed that all the participants strongly support the idea of implementing the use of differentiated assessment in the Department of English Language and Literature (DELL), however, there are many institutional and pedagogical challenges need to be considered. Some recommendations and pedagogical implications were presented.

**Keywords:** differentiated assessment, differentiated instruction, public college, Oman, pedagogical challenges

## 1. Introduction

Assessment is a key element in the teaching-learning process because it offers information about the intended learning outcomes. Moreover, it shapes where a teacher begins in the instructional process, and provides the data necessary for curriculum review and modifications, and it informs students and their parents about their learning (Moon, 2010). Differentiated assessment is simply a form formative assessment which is an on-going and dynamic process which supports learning and helps teachers to address their students' real needs, strengths and weakness. It has multiple purposes which are assessment for learning purposes and assessment of learning purposes. It means selecting the right and reasonable assessment tools and strategies which provide each student with the best opportunity to demonstrate his / her own learning capabilities. Moreover it shapes and supports differentiated instruction and empowers students to self-direct their learning (ibid). Further, it helps in tailoring learning and members in a public college in Oman to answer these questions: What are the assessment tasks to individual student needs and capabilities. Differentiated assessment is assessment for learning which is usually used to promote learning and improve teaching and it has become crucial to assessment for learning purposes (Lee & Coniam, 2011). Using variety of assessment tools is often recommended as good practice in response numerous critiques of the over-reliance on traditional examination and their shortcomings (Craddock & Mathias, 2009).

### 1.1 The Institutional Context

This study is conducted in the Department of English Language & Literature (DELL), Rustaq College of Applied Science (RUS-CAS), Sultanate of Oman. There are six Colleges of Applied Sciences affiliated to the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). RUS-CAS is the only college that offers English language teacher training program along with the English language foundation which is offered across the six colleges. There are about 60 EFL/ESL teachers in this college who have been teaching English as EFL/ESL for several years. Both formative and summative assessment modes are used to assess students in both the ELT and foundation programs. Summative assessment particularly final exams, has been taking more weighting than other forms formative assessment. It helps multiple purposes such as assessment for instructional planning, and assessment for learning and assessment of learning. Moreover, differentiated assessment informs differentiated instruction and differentiated

instruction leads to differentiated assessment (Wormeli, 2006). Therefore, the present study is conducted to look into teachers' views about the potential use of differentiated assessment in this context and the possible challenges and solutions in implementing such kind of assessment practices.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Differentiated Instruction and Its Principles

Assessment is a key factor and vital to success in a differentiated classroom because there are dynamic relationships between differentiated instruction and assessment. It is an integral part of learning which aims for providing feedback for learning and feedback to enable learners monitor progress and evaluates the effectiveness of learning strategies (Carless, 2003). There are bidirectional relationships between the two and they inform each other (Moon, 2010). The role differentiated assessment in supporting differentiated instruction is obvious because it facilitates the instruction process (Rock et al., 2008). Differentiated instruction is a process where a teacher responds proactively to every learner's needs (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Moreover, differentiated instruction is effective instruction that is responsive to students' readiness, interests and learning preferences and styles during the instruction process. All three characteristics of the learner—readiness, interests and preference could allow educators and students to build new learning through connections to existing knowledge and preferred ways learning. The process of differentiating instruction for students depends on the ongoing use of assessment to gather information about where students are in their learning and about their readiness, interests and learning preferences. Teachers see this information to vary the learning environment, instruction, and assessment and evaluation. *Readiness* refers to the student's starting point for learning, relative to the concept being studied. Attention to students' *interests* enhances the relevancy of learning by linking new information to students' experience and enthusiasm. *Learning preferences* are the many different ways in which learners prefer to acquire process and work with information. Learning preferences are influenced by gender, culture, the classroom environment, learning styles and multiple intelligences. By attending, at various times, to a learner's readiness, interests and learning preferences, we increase the likelihood that students will be able to build new learning through connection to existing knowledge and preferred ways of working and that they will be engaged in the learning. Further, differentiated instruction is guided by general principles of differentiation such as the environment should be conducive and supportive to learning. Additionally, the curriculum and syllabus should be constructed and delivered with good quality. Moreover, assessment used should inform teaching and learning. Finally, the instruction process should be responsive to every learner's style and preference of learning (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Teachers can differentiate their instruction through the content, process how students take in and make sense of the content, or through product, how students show what they know, understand and can do and finally through effective teaching environment where the climate of classroom is conducive and supportive to learning. The following figure illustrates the concept map for differentiated instruction.

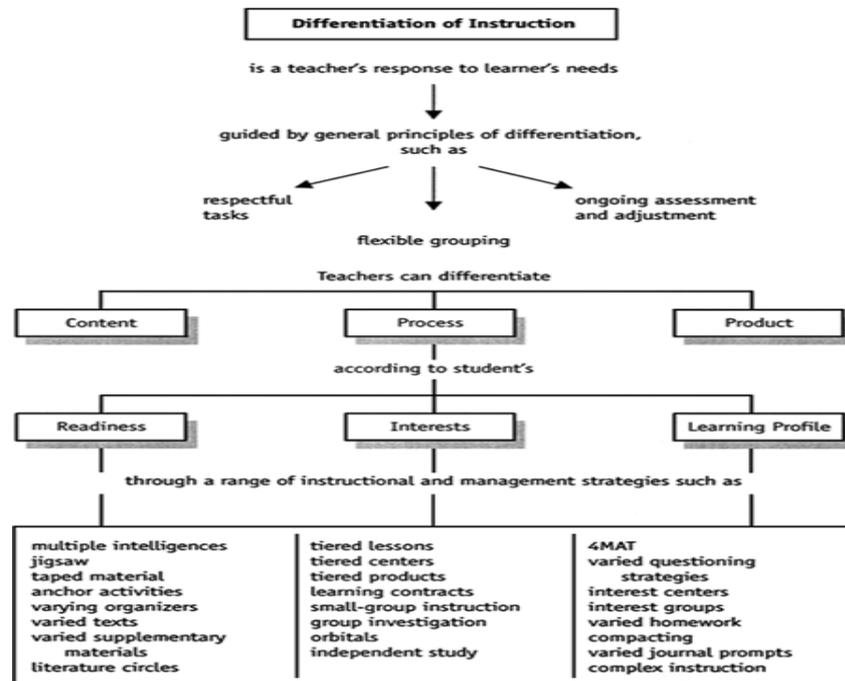


Figure 1. Concept map for differentiating instruction (Tomlinson & Susan, 2005, p. 3)

## 2.2 Differentiated Assessment: What is All the Fuss about?

Teachers need to fully understand differentiated assessment is just a type of formative assessment which provides information about student learning during instruction process through which teachers gather data before, during, and after instructing from multiple resources to identify learners' needs and strengths (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010; Moon, 2010). It is on-going and diagnostic process which is inseparable from instruction (Tomlinson, 1999). The use of assessment for learning means using tools and strategies to provide each student with the best opportunity to demonstrate his or her learning for the purpose of meeting students' needs and informs teaching (Wormeli, 2006). *"Differentiated assessment and instruction is an educational structure that seeks to address differences among students by providing flexibility in the levels of knowledge acquisition, skills development and types of assessment items undertaken by students"* (Varsavsky & Rayner, 2013). It helps teachers and practitioner to differentiate between students' performance within the same year level, and respects their diverse talents and learning styles and provides mechanisms that enable them to develop skills to learn in ways that they might otherwise have found more challenging for them (Varsavsky & Rayner, 2013). Teachers using differentiated assessment are ceaseless assessors, valuing informal, formal, and various assessment techniques over time instead of one-shot declarations of mastery and the learning and assessment task are tailored according to individual student needs and capabilities (Varsavsky & Rayner, 2013; Moon, 2010). Both differentiated assessment and instruction are based on the fact that the needs of the students cannot all be met in the same way. In order to meet each student's needs involves teacher's understanding of each student to guide their selection of a reasonable range of assessment tools and strategies. Differentiated assessment is simply assessment for learning practices. In order to have successful differentiated assessment practices, teachers need to already have certain information about their students. This information involves students' readiness, interests, learning preferences, background knowledge, and their existing understandings (ibid). The purpose of differentiated assessment is to individualize learning and to help students to connect different learning experiences and enable them to use their prior knowledge to learn the new things. Moreover, it aims to engage students in learning and create a context of learning. Further, it attempts to remind students of essential skills or knowledge and to provide immediate and timely feedback, it provides students with options of assessment to choose, and it helps students to ask strategic and critical questions model strategies to help students to improve their own learning, it creates opportunities for students to experience a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning, skills and knowledge and to foster their metacognition through their self-assessment techniques, accommodates all students' individual differences (Wormeli, 2006). Teachers and students can benefit from differentiated assessment because the data gathered from various sources provide a clear picture of each student

readiness for learning specific skills (Chapman & King, 2003). There are several advantages for differentiated instruction and assessment: Firstly, assessment is for learning rather than of learning and learning is usually active rather than passive as it enables students to engage with the information, make sense of it and demonstrate their level of mastery of the new information. It views learning as ongoing process during which students receive new information, interpret it and connect to what they have already know and to their experiences that they have already had. Finally, learning takes place in a social context and there is a room for individual and collaborative work for students to make sense of the new information and it offers individual accountability for grading and assessment (Moon, 2010).

### 2.3 Differentiated Assessment Techniques

Students have different strengths and weaknesses in how they learn. Similarly, students are different in how we can best demonstrate what we have learned. Re-garding the traditional assessment model, answering multiple-choice questions does not allow for much variability in how students demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired. On one hand, that is strength of tests because it makes sure everyone is being compared on the same domains in the same manner which increases the consistency and comparability of the measure. On the other hand, testing favors those who are better test-takers and does not give students any choice in how they believe they can best demonstrate what they have learned. Thus, it is recommended that multiple and varied assessments be used so that (1) a sufficient number of samples are obtained and (2) a sufficient variety of measures are used. Variety of measurement can be accomplished by assessing the students through different measures that allow you to see them apply what they have learned in different ways and from different perspectives. Teachers need to create a variety of entry points to ensure that student differing abilities, strengths, and needs are all taken into consideration. Students then need varying opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge based on the teaching hence *differentiated assessment*. There are many activities which can be used to differentiate assessment in classroom: quizzes, tests, essays, portfolios, debates, projects, reports, timelines, demonstrations, maps, learning logs, stimulations, journals, graphic organizers, student-created rubrics, multimedia presentations, brochures, pamphlets, postcards, song, peer-evaluations, self-evaluations, models, exhibits, assignments, games etc. Here are the nuts and bolts of the differentiated assessment process:

- Choice is a key to the process. Choice of learning activity as well as choice in the assessment (how the student will demonstrate understanding).
- The learning tasks always consider the students' strengths/weaknesses. Visual learners will have visual cues; auditory learners will have auditory cues, etc.
- Groupings of students will vary, some will work better independently, and others will work in various group settings.
- Multiple intelligence is taken into consideration as are the students' learning and thinking styles.
- Lessons are authentic to ensure that all students can make connections.
- Project and problem based learning are also key in differentiated instruction and assessment.
- Lessons and assessments are adapted to meet the needs of all learners.
- Opportunities for children to think for themselves are clearly evident

### 2.4 Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Assessment

*Assessment in higher education serves multiple purposes such as providing information about student learning, student progress, teaching quality, and program and institutional accountability* (Fletcher, et al. 2011:119). Assessment in tertiary education faces several challenges (Carless, 2007). The key challenge is how to stimulate the right and intended kind of learning. The second challenge is how to actively engage students in evaluating their own learning individually and collaboratively (Ploegh, Tillema & Segers, 2009: 102). Further, the class size is considered to be one of the most prevalent challenges because it is difficult for a teacher to design assessment task and activities which suit all learners. Moreover, according to my previous findings controlling assessment quality is not as easy task and it can be one of the challenges, but it can be done through a variety of approaches (Holi & Al Ajmi, 2013).

## 3. The Study

### 3.1 Purpose of the Study

The present study attempts to realize these objectives: Firstly, to find out the DELL faculty members' views and perceptions about the use of differentiated assessment and its importance. Secondly, to explore to what extent do

the DELL faculty members support the idea of using differentiated assessment. Thirdly, to identify some challenges in implementing differentiated assessment in this particular context. Finally to suggest some ways for implementing differentiated assessment be implemented and sustained in the DELL. To achieve these objectives, an open-ended survey was distributed to 40 English language faculty members in a public college in Oman.

### 3.2 Research Questions

- 1) To what extent do DELL faculty members support the idea of using differentiated assessment?
- 2) What are challenges in implementing differentiated assessment in the DELL?
- 3) How best can differentiated assessment implemented and sustained?

### 3.3 Methods

This study is an exploratory study which attempts to investigate teachers' views about the potential use of differentiated assessment in an EFL context notably at the Department of English Language & Literature (DELL), Rustaq College of Applied Sciences in Oman. Participants of this study were 40 EFL/ ESL English language teachers who have been teaching for several years. The participants were multi-nationality teachers and they were selected randomly out of a total of 60 teachers'. A questionnaire which comprises 5 open-ended questions was distributed to them. The first question is centered on whether the DELL teachers support the idea of using differentiated assessment or not. Question 2, revolves around the importance of differentiated assessment according to ESL/EFL teachers' perspectives and finally the possible strategies for implementing differentiated assessment and the challenges which might be encountered during its implementation in this particular context.

## 4. Survey Results: Key Findings

This part reports the main study findings in relation to the study questions.

### 4.1 To What Extent do DELL Faculty Members Support the Idea of Using Differentiated Assessment?

As for this study question which centered on whether the teachers support the idea of using differentiated assessment in the DELL or not. The vast majority of the participants express their support to the idea of implementing differentiated assessment and here are some of the extracts from their responses:

*A teacher said: yes, because it aims to discover students' real learning needs in relation to a particular course. It also helps teachers to plan their teaching that addresses the students' needs.*

*Another teacher added: "My understanding is that each student will be assessed according to their need. I assume it refers to formative assessment, not summative. In formative assessment, each student needs an individual assessment of their work, and guidance on how they can improve. There, I support the idea. In addition, personalizing feedback can be motivating to students-it shows we are interested and care about their learning development".*

*A teacher said: yes, each student has different way of learning.*

*Another teacher reported: "depending on one type of assessment is not good enough to evaluate students' performance for at least one crucial reason which is more one chance for students to show their performance.*

*Another teacher responded: Yes, I support it because such type of assessment will help both the teachers and the students. It will help the teachers to figure out the strength and weakness of their students & using suitable assessment tool. In term of students, it will help them to show their needs to the teachers & follow up their progress in learning".*

*A teacher replied: Yes I do support it. Students have different strengths and weaknesses. It is important to take this into consideration when assessing them.*

*Another teacher reported: "Since students' learning styles and their different ability levels, with their differentiated strengths and weakness, are psychologically real, then it is reasonable enough to assume that the ongoing assessment which is going to support the development of students' learning abilities will have to be differentiated so that the assessment process is accurate, within the system where it is used, and fair to the students".*

*A teacher retaliated: "Yes, I do support this idea because students will achieve success when teachers provide more corrective activities and more enhancement tasks, especially for those who need them or those who lag behind".*

*A teacher responded: "I do support differentiated assessment if: 1. our class sizes are small enough to use this*

*method properly. This would mean no more than 15 students per class.2. Students still needed to pass a minimum standard in all aspects of English.3. Teachers would decide which skills needed the most improvement and could focus on those for the differentiated assessment".*

*A teacher said: "I am in between because this will be helpful and facilitative for students, yet very demanding for the teacher especially that we teach large classes with over 20 students. I will definitely result in more learning from the students' part and in more loads form the teachers' part"*

*A teacher reported: "Yes. Different courses require different assessment tools, depending on their specificity. Also, it allows different types of learners to prove their understanding of the material covered.*

*Another teacher believed: Yes, because the students are not at the same proficiency level and needs".*

All the responses had shown support the idea of using differentiated assessment because teachers believed that it places the learners on center of learning process and addresses their needs and learning preferences.

#### 4.2 Why Is Differentiated Assessment Important?

Table 1. This table depicts teachers' views about the important of differentiated assessment in an EFL classroom

<b>Summary of Teachers' Views about the Importance of Differentiated Assessment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It helps to achieve the target learning outcomes.</li> <li>• It caters for all students' diverse levels, needs and learning styles</li> <li>• It gives actual results of students' levels</li> <li>• It is suitable to measure performance of classes that have different learning styles</li> <li>• It can help to assess different skills</li> <li>• It treats students as individuals rather than "a mass"</li> <li>• It is beneficial for both teachers and students' in improving learning outcomes</li> <li>• It helps improve teaching and students can be treated as individuals</li> <li>• It informs educators on tailoring their instructional means to fit students' individual needs</li> <li>• It will enable teachers to get familiar with the potentials of their students</li> <li>• It will address individual needs of each student which will prove beneficial to each student</li> <li>• It enables teachers to obtain a representative picture of a student's progress and achievement</li> <li>• It determines students' needs and the effectiveness of teaching and learning process</li> <li>• It allows students to work on skills they need most</li> <li>• It makes assessment more positive from students' views</li> <li>• It helps to explore each student's unique talents</li> <li>• It provide more accurate and reliable record of the student's performance</li> <li>• It give the chance for every learner to excel improve in his her own capacity; thus, not leaving any student out</li> <li>• It offers learners more opportunities to promote their cognitive and metacognitive strategies</li> <li>• It opens up new ways for students of looking at their learning and it treats them all students in fairly way</li> </ul>

#### 4.3 What Are the Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Assessment in the DELL?

Table 2. Illustrates the various possible challenges in implementing DA in a public college in Oman

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#### **Summary of Institutional, Instructional and Pedagogical Challenges in implementing Differentiated Assessment**

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- Time factor
  - Course description
  - Teacher educational background
  - Class size
  - Giving feedback to each student
  - Teachers need to know every student style of learning
  - It is difficult to create many tasks that meet all students' styles and needs
  - It is time-consuming & costly
  - Not all teachers are properly trained in early recognition of learning styles of their students
  - Increasing working load of the teacher in term of preparing the activities & marking those activities
  - Using different materials and assessment tools in the same course might be difficult for teachers
  - The system might not approve this way of assessment
  - The sheer number of students in a class
  - Very low levels of motivation in individual learners
  - Lack of feedback on students' learning needs
  - Lack of organization within learning environment (especially as a result of shortage of instructional means)
  - Teachers might not be happy with the demands of this type of assessment
  - The ministry might not be sure of the result of this way of assessing students
  - Current curriculum and teaching styles
  - Lack of potential resources and assessment tasks
  - Resistance from students / officials people involved
  - Trained professionals on writing assessments
  - Syllabus & course delivery plan
  - Passing failing system in an institution
  - Professional development for some teachers to standardize the assessment techniques
  - Time and skills involved in creating several tests instead of just one general
  - Students have various needs which are always difficult to be met
  - It demands different assessment methods and tools
  - It lack of practicality of differentiated assessment
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#### 4.4 How Can Differentiated Assessment Be Best Implemented and Sustained?

Table 3. Depicts teachers' suggestions for implementing DA in a public college in Oman

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#### Some Possible Strategies for Implementing Differentiated Assessment

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- Teacher training
  - Inclusion of such assessment in the course description
  - Considering the size of the class
  - Allotting marks to assessment work
  - Build feedback and assessment into curriculum
  - Given regular feedback and compare it with previous ones
  - have smaller class size
  - have structured approach to assessment based on the aims of the course- prevents teachers from digression
  - Have the feedback assessment part of the course grade (students need to exhibits progress effort)
  - Assigning students in groups and giving each group suitable tasks
  - Teachers should be trained on such issues and no centralized exams
  - Maintaining individual student files
  - Teacher journals
  - Students readiness to accepts assessment as a tool for differentiated instruction and their willingness to get involved in such a learning process where the learner and the instructors are ready to proactively adjust learning and teaching methods to the best hoped learning outcomes
  - Teachers should be allocated less teaching / contact hours to concentrate on implementing these procedures. If teachers had time to focus on this, overall productivity-of both students and teachers –would improve
  - Design and provide appropriate training and preparation of a faculty team to implement the new standards of differentiated instruction and assessment
  - Consultations of institution which tries differentiated assessment
  - Keep a small number of students in a class
  - Provide much supplementary materials for the courses
  - Designate a trained writer of assessment
  - Create syllabi or course plans that allow teachers to be highly flexible and design a grading system suitable to differentiated assessment
  - Team work, continuity & sustained improvements
  - Students must be well-prepared from foundation level
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#### 5. Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

The key findings of the present are: all the surveyed teachers support the idea of using differentiated assessment in the DELL, however, there some important factors needs to be consider such as class size, teaching load, and staff training on differentiated assessment issues and techniques. Concerning the importance of differentiated assessment, the participants believed that differentiated assessment is of utmost importance for several reasons as it caters for individual need and learning preferences and styles. Regarding differentiated assessment challenges, most of the respondents believed that there are some institutional challenges such as class size, staff training, etc. Moreover, there are instructional and pedagogical challenges such as the ability to design different tasks and activities which fit and suit all learners. Based on the above key findings, the study offers these recommendations for implementing differentiated assessment in the DELL. Firstly, teachers need to be trained on differentiated assessment –related issues before implementing it. Secondly, teaching loads and class size need to be considered, further, feedback should be timely and students should be encouraged to be reflective learners. Additionally, trained exam writers should be designated for assessment. Finally, differentiated instruction should

be used in order to implement differentiated assessment because they inform each other.

## 6. Pedagogical Implications, Limitations, Conclusions

There are three key limitations in this study which merit mentioning. Firstly, students were not involved in this study and only teachers took part in this study. Involving students would yield better results and findings. Secondly, only survey was used in this study, a study with more tools such as interviews may help in getting different and more reliable results. Finally, the sample size was only 40 teachers which may impede generalization. The study concluded that differentiated assessment is of utmost importance according to teachers' responses and therefore, it is recommended that the DELL should implement this mode of assessment in their English language programs in order to address all students' needs and preferences. Finally, the study has several pedagogical implications for teachers, practitioners and exam writers. The findings might help teachers, practitioners, and exam writers in improving their assessment practices and meeting students' diverse needs and preferences. The findings support the assumption that differentiated assessment is shaped by differentiated assessment and they are inseparable twins which complements each other.

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