The Problems of Contemporary Education

On Differentiation Strategies in the EFL Mixed-Ability Classroom: Towards Promoting the Synergistic Learning Environment

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to examine the implementation of various differentiation practices seen from teachers' and learners' perspectives. The paper reviews recent research studies related to the adjustments teachers make to content, process and product, according to the patterns in student readiness, interest or learning profile and provides a descriptive analysis of the teacher and student responses to the effectiveness of differentiation techniques.

This paper draws on the analysis of teachers' and students' responses to the key interview questions about their experiences and views of mixed-ability and same-ability classes. The data were collected by means of two web-based surveys using Google Forms and involving 25 teachers of the Alibra School in Moscow and 100 undergraduate B.Ed. students of Moscow City University (MCU). The participants' responses were visualized and published on the Internet with open access to the questionnaires' data. Open-ended questions were organized and thematically coded in NVivo to facilitate analysis. The coding of several debatable cases was further manually checked and examined by the authors.

The results indicate that the majority of the teachers purposefully apply a variety of management tools in different parts of the lessons to achieve elaborate educational results and to infuse a growth-oriented mindset in the classroom. With regard to the students' views on the notion in question, the research reveals broad patterns in learners' attitudes characterized by certain correlations between students' academic training and format preferences.

Keywords: differentiation techniques, mixed-ability, same-ability, learning abilities, individualization.

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1. Introduction

In the area of ELT the concept of differentiation is frequently raised as an issue. In the face of diversity challenges teachers encounter every day, it is significant to give students multiple opportunities which guarantee their development, boost motivation and are indispensable for the students to feel supported **during the lesson. Given that meeting learners' needs is one** of most **teachers' persistent efforts, the term differentiation is relevant in various educational contexts.** Having worked in ELT for a while any educator will realize how tough it is to get a homogeneous class when working with adults. That happens for different reasons, but mostly because students come to us with varying proficiency levels, cultural backgrounds, interests, studying habits, learning profiles and motivation. In the teaching environment classes may be incredibly mixed **regarding the level, and some students may have what is known as a "spiky" profile and** demonstrate consistent proficiency at speaking, reading and listening but struggle with writing (Roberts, 2012). However, even though most of the teachers may experience difficulty in trying to manage heterogeneous classes, they still refuse or avoid using various differentiation techniques, **probably assuming that differentiation is trying to do "something different for each of the 30**-plus **students in a single classroom", which can be very time**-consuming and ineffective (Tomlinson, 2001). One point that most teachers would make against differentiation is that it is a distractor from the learning process rather than a helping tool. Additionally, educators may maintain that **"with so much to do in classrooms today, it is just much easier to have everybody doing the same thing"** (Williard-Holt, 1994). There is no doubt that it is less demanding to level the pace of the lesson and engage all students in identical activities, but on the other hand, Tomlinson makes a fair **point saying that "one**-size-fits-all instruction will inevitably sag or pinch – exactly as single-size **clothing"** (Tomlinson, 2001).

Literature Review

Surveying the key terms of the current paper and defining the meanings traditionally attributed to differentiation and mixed-ability teaching we begin by emphasizing that although the two notions share some common ground, a clear distinction between them should be recognized. In parti**cular, "mixed**-ability teaching is more concerned with pupil management for teaching purposes, whereas differentiation places the emphasis fairly and squarely on the requirements of **individual learners, whether they be in streamed, 'setted' or mixed**-ability **groupings"** (Convery, Coyle, 1993).

One widespread understanding, or rather misunderstanding of individualization and **differentiation is that differentiated instruction involves "teaching everything in at least three** different ways – that a differentiated **classroom functions like a dinner buffet"** (Kamarulzaman et al., 2017). Researchers will argue that is it neither a differentiated classroom, nor it is practical.

As a result, it gives rise to misconceptions about differentiation, i.e. "differentiation is primarily an approach to teaching certain groups of students (e.g., students with individualized education programs (IEPs), English language learners, gifted students) or to teaching in special **programs or settings. While the truth is that "differentiation** is necessary for teaching all students in all kinds of settings, including the general education classroom. Differentiation is rooted in good **teaching, but good teaching is not always differentiated"** (Hockett, 2018).

In addressing diversity, differentiated instruction recognizes individual learners as unique and thus offers various ways in learning (Mulroy, 2003; Tomlinson, 2000, Tomlinson, 2001, Tomlinson, 2013; Valiende et al., 2011). It is not only a pedagogical approach, but it also involves organizati**on of learners' personal needs aiming towards their personal outcome** (Koutselini, 2006**). Naturally enough, the process and tools of differentiation are complex and require "a focus** upon the teaching plan, the teaching and learning interaction and then an evaluation of what took **place"** (O'Brien, 2006).

The central figure in differentiation, thus, is a teacher who responds to his or her students' readiness, interests, learning profile (i.e. learning preferences, styles, culture), and also environment. This ap**proach was first put forward in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that explains the progress of one's knowledge (or rather the occurrence of learning) as one is** given a task slightly higher or more challenging than his or her level of ZPD (Kamarulzaman et al., 2017). Through different differentiation techniques and differentiation instruction students are provided with a variety of choices on output, input and performance, which boosts their engagement, positively influences the level of motivation and, as a result, academic performance.

Differentiating instruction means "shaking up" what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas and expressing what they learn (Tomlinson, 2013). We fully support Roberts who points out that differentiation is what teachers do to "meet the individual needs of the students" (Roberts, 2012).

Specifically, Tomlinson and Roberts speak about differentiating three curricular elements by the teacher:

1)   content – input, what students learn;
2)   process – how students go about making sense of ideas and information; and
3)   product – output, how students demonstrate what they have learned Tomlinson, 2001).

On the other hand, Rachael Roberts calls it:

1)   differentiation by task;
2)   differentiation by teaching method;
3)   differentiation by outcome (Roberts, 2012).

Another important point to make is that teachers can also differentiate for readiness (by varying degrees of difficulty based on the ability level of the learner), interests (differentiate content by interest) and learning profiles. We are inclined to agree with Gregory and Chapman who noticed that students connect better in their learning when their readiness level, interests and/or learning profiles have been respected and valued (Gregory, Chapman, 2002).

According to specialists in ELT, differentiated instruction is an approach that caters for every student's learning needs recognizing "that each learner is unique" (Theisen, 2002). Differentiated instruction as a result of enhanced motivation also improves students' academic achievement. Moreover, as Lavandenz and Armas found in their study English language learners were engaged in learning itself when the instructor employed cooperative learning that provided the students avenues for meaningful conversations (Lavandenz, Armas, 2008).

Russian ELT specialists as well as their western colleagues highlight the necessity for implementing differentiation instruction in an ELT classroom in order to overcome learning difficulties, facilitate students' learning abilities and enhance their uptake (Oorshak et al., 2001: 19; Schukina, 2015; 20; Buldina, 2016; Antonova, 2017; Pribylnova, 2018).

Through this research, we would like to find out how the teachers in our school feel about differentiation, whether they find it effective for the learning process, whether they differentiate at all and if so, what techniques they use. If the teachers do not differentiate, it will give us an opportunity to carry out or offer a workshop or a seminar where we would have the chance to acquaint the educators with some best international practices and expertise. In the second part of the research our motivation is to find out whether the students of the B.Ed. degree course notice differentiation techniques used in the classroom, whether they find them useful and if yes, whether it caters for the individual needs of the learners.

2. Materials and methods
Participants and Research Instruments

The findings of the present paper reveal attitudes towards the use of differentiation strategies as investigated by means of two anonymous online surveys involving B.Ed. undergraduate students of Moscow City University and teachers of the Alibra School in Moscow. The research uses a relatively narrow sample of 125 respondents which constitutes nearly ½ of the number of the teachers that work in the Alibra School in Moscow (25 respondents) and ¼ of all B.Ed. students majoring in English of the Institute of Foreign Languages of Moscow City University (100 respondents), and thus can be considered representative for the purposes of a pilot explanatory study. The questionnaires were labeled properly to indicate that the data obtained would be presented as general conclusions. In order to avert biases associated with the figures, the survey results have been published on the Internet with open access to the questionnaires' data (Differentiation in EFL Classroom (Teacher's Version); Differentiation in EFL Classroom (Students' Version)).

Questionnaire Description

The following tables present the questions used in the surveys and discuss the study objectives and research expectations.

Table 1. Differentiation in EFL Classroom (Teacher's Version)

№	Question	Question Type	Rationale	Expectations
1	How long have you been teaching?	Closed	To estimate **teachers' mastery** and the variety of differentiation techniques.	Less qualified teachers will avoid differentiation completely and/or use a limited range of techniques; more experienced teachers will be more skilled in this respect.
2	What qualifications do you have?	Closed	See 1	See 1
3	Which field of ELT do you work in?	Closed	To assess the **teachers' readiness** to differentiate.	Teachers who teach exam classes will less eagerly differentiate due to the format and the peculiarities of the assessment requirements of the syllabus.
4	Have you ever had mixed-ability classes?	Closed	To estimate how conducive the learning situation is to differentiation.	The majority of the teachers **will answer "yes".**
5	Have you ever had students **with "spiky"** profiles?	Closed	See 4	See 4
6	Do you take into account different **learners' abilities** when planning a lesson?	Closed	To determine the target respondents for the questionnaire.	See 4
7-9	Do you adapt the tasks in any of these ways?	Closed	To evaluate the **respondents'** knowledge and repertoire of differentiation techniques.	The repertoire of differentiation techniques will be quite limited.
7a-9a	Do you think that any of the things above help learners to learn? Why?	Open	**To uncover teachers'** rationale behind using each of the differentiation techniques.	Some teachers will give more detailed and opinionated answers.
10	Do you adapt the task on the spot to different **learners' needs if** you see that the task is too difficult/too easy for them?	Closed	See 7-9	Most of the teachers will not differentiate on the spot.

10a	If you answered **'yes', say when** and how you do it.	Open	To compare and contrast differentiation techniques of the respondents with the **best worlds'** practices for further analysis.	Most teachers will skip the question and/or will not specify how and when they differentiate.
11	Do you adapt your teaching and/or classroom activities and /or syllabus by doing things not mentioned above?	Open	See 7-9	Most of the teachers do not use other differentiation techniques.
12	Do you think differentiating tasks stimulates **student's** productivity? Why?	Open	To discover the **teachers' general** attitude towards differentiation.	Respondents will give detailed and opinionated answers.

Table 2. Differentiation in EFL Classroom (Students' Version)

№	*Question*	*Question Type*	*Rationale*	*Expectations*
1	How long have you been learning English?	Closed	**To define students'** proficiency in English.	Most students will report extensive experience in ESL (8+ years).
2	How can you evaluate your level of English?	Closed	See 1	See 1
3	Do you study in a mixed-ability class or in the same-ability class?	Closed	To indicate the range of students in homogeneous and heterogeneous classrooms.	The number of students in mixed- and same-ability classes will be relatively equal with a narrow margin of 5-10 percent.
4	Do your language sessions provide enough opportunity to speak/write about topics and experiences that are important and/or interesting to you?	Closed	To identify whether the existing learning environment creates equal opportunities for all students and provides them with the same resources.	Most students will admit to having interest-based language sessions which include activities of various levels of complexity and meet their learning needs.
5	On average, how supportive and sensitive **to students' needs are** your English language teachers?	Closed	To define whether learning conditions are characterised by effective and sufficient guidance, support and feedback.	Students will be largely satisfied with the degree to which teachers provide academic and behavioural support.

6	How often do teachers encourage the students of your group to engage in different activities when working on the same concept, such as "Some of us will study … while some of us will …"?	Closed	To certify whether **teachers' use of** instructional strategies is appropriately adjusted to differentiate for **students' readiness.**	A significant number of students may report a lack of flexible and differentiated instruction.
7	In what ways do teachers adapt tasks and examples to best fit **students' shared and individual needs?**	Closed	To identify if teaching strategies respond to **the students' shared** and individual needs.	Students may mention receiving adapted tasks for homework and more time allotted to weaker students to complete tasks.
8	Do your language instructors always practice re-teaching or reviewing key concepts and skills if the class finds it difficult to move on?	Closed	See 5	See 5
9	Are you ever paired or grouped in your English lessons? To what extent do you think it helps?	Closed	To evaluate the used criteria for pairing and grouping students.	Most students will report grouping either by ability or randomly, probably due to being unequipped with sufficient knowledge of differentiation strategies.
10	If you do work in pairs/groups, how are they usually organized?	Closed	See 9	See 9
11	How often do you receive feedback from your teachers? How useful do you find it?	Closed	See 5	Most students will report receiving constructive feedback from educators.
12	To what extent do you agree that mixed ability classes provide more room for student development?	Open	**To discover students'** general attitude towards differentiation and to determine which **format in students'** views leads to greater achievements.	**The students'** perception of mixed-ability classes may be both positive and negative with a correlation between their academic performance and format preferences.

In their research the authors used the Pearson Chi-Square statistical test in order to prove or disprove their hypothesis empirically. The authors assume that to the question "Do your language sessions provide enough opportunity to speak/write about topics and experiences that are **important and/or interesting to you?**" most of the students will answer in the affirmative and will find their classes sufficiently interesting and motivating. It is also predicted that the students will find pair grouping techniques effective (around 60 %). In general, it is assumed that the students might have overall positive views on mixed-ability pairing. However, the authors think that a fairly high percentage of students will find mixed-ability pairing ineffective (around 40 %).

3. Results
Teachers' Views

Altogether 25 teachers took part in the survey, which is nearly half of the teachers that work in the school. The teachers that took part in the survey come from different teaching backgrounds, qualifications and experience (Table 3), so that would provide broad information, indicative enough to make conclusions about the whole school.

Table 3. Teacher Sample Description

Category	Qualifications (%)					Field of ELT (%)						
	CELTA or TESOL	DELTA or Trinity Diploma	TKT	PGCE	Other	General English	Teaching Young Learners	Academic English / English for Specific Purposes	Business English	Exam Preparation	Teacher Training	Teaching Teens
Teachers	44	12	24	4	16	92	52	28	40	64	28	4

The figures reveal that 48 % of the respondents have extensive experience in ELT (10+ years). 36 % of the survey participants completed 5-10 years as full-time teachers, 4 % of them spent 3-5 years teaching. One response was from a teacher with professional teaching experience of three years with an overall ELT experience of nearly eight years. As expected, most of the teachers (64 %) have ELT qualifications. Most of the respondents are active in more than one area of ELT, 92 % work with General English and 52 % with young learners, 64 % in exam preparation.

Q6*. *Do you take into account different learners' abilities when planning a lesson?*

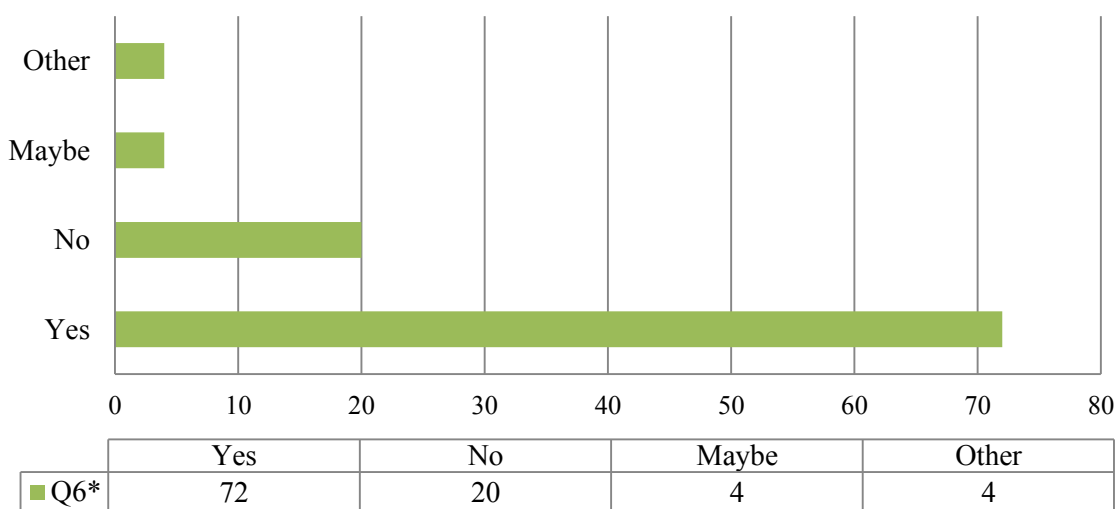|	Yes	No	Maybe	Other
■ Q6*	72	20	4	4

Fig. 1. Focus on abilities in lesson planning

In line with the research expectations, most of the teachers have mixed-ability classes (80 %) and only 20 % of the respondents train homogeneous groups. At the same time, some of them pointed out that they work with students, who have **"spiky"** profiles and demonstrate **"different** levels of skill in an overall **area"** (EPALE, 2020), which suggests some ground for differentiation, too. So, only two respondents did not mention working with learners with **"spiky"** profiles.

The value of the Pearson Chi-Square test statistic for Figure 1 is 7.35. The p-value is 0.06. The **critical χ2 $_{0.05;3}$ value is 7.81,** which indicates that the hypothesis drawn from the authors' theory is not disproved by empirical investigation.

It was assumed that those respondents, who do not differentiate in their lessons (8 out of 25), would not finish the questionnaire but contrary to that expectation, some of them did. Attempting to explain the reasons not to differentiate (Figure 2), 33 % of the respondents found it **"too** time-**consuming",** 17 % estimated that **"differentiation doesn't help",** the other 17 % admitted that **"weaker** or stronger students should change the **group".** A smaller sample from the same group of the respondents (8 %) wrote **"some** of my former students told me not to give them easier **tasks".**

Q 6a*. If you answered "No" to the previous question, please, explain WHY. Tick as many things as relevant. If it is something else, please specify.*
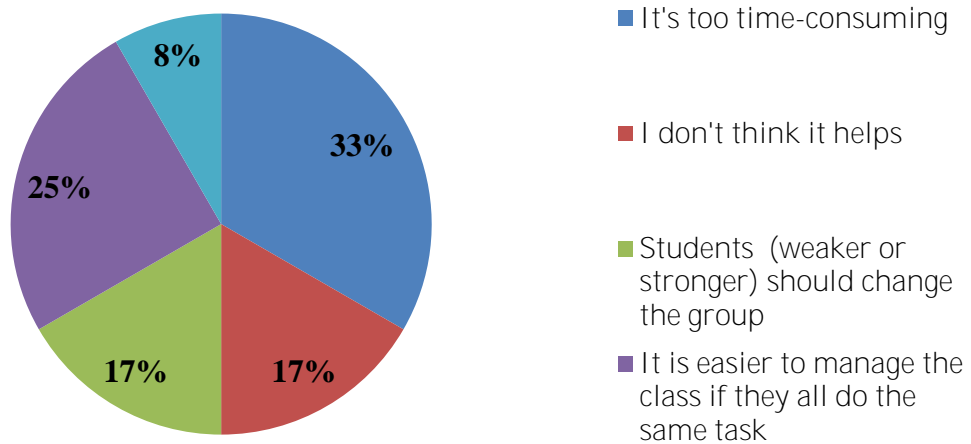

- It's too time-consuming
- I don't think it helps
- Students (weaker or stronger) should change the group
- It is easier to manage the class if they all do the same task

Fig. 2. Reasons not to differentiate

The value of the Pearson Chi-Square test statistic for Figure 2 is 12.82. The p-value is 0.01. The critical χ2 $_{0.05;4}$ value is 9.48, which indicates that the hypothesis drawn from the authors' theory is not disproved by empirical investigation.

The next set of questions aimed to examine differentiation techniques leveraged by the teachers in more detail. Regarding differentiation by task, 66.7 % of the respondents **"allow** more time to weaker students to **prepare".** Exactly the same proportion of educators **"des**ign more complicated tasks to stretch stronger **students".** 38.1 % and 33.3 % respectively **"adapt** hand-**outs"** and **"adjust** homework **tasks".** Only 4.8 % do all the above.

Concerning differentiation by method, most of the teachers do all the suggested things (66.7 %), 4.2 % of the respondents **"do** not do all of the **above"** and one teacher (4.2 %) **"uses** Bloom's taxonomy for **differentiation".** With regard to differentiation by output, it is evident that **"setting** different requirements for task **completion"** and **"encouraging** weaker students more than stronger **ones"** are the most favoured techniques by the respondents 47.6 % and 52.4 % respectively. A significant number of the teachers set individual targets (42.9 %), while only 3 % adapt tests for weaker and/or stronger students. Some 4.8 % labelled differentiation by method as **"too** time-**consuming".**

The other questions the respondents were asked to reply to, were supposed to determine why the teachers find the specified differentiation technique effective and explain how they are tried

out. Although, it turned out that most of the answers overlap and the respondents gave more general reactions than expected, a sound understanding of differentiation techniques by teachers manifested itself in the following attitudes:

Teacher 1: I can make stronger students think outside the box, come up with different ways to do the same task, e.g. name as many synonyms or antonyms as possible, remember set expressions, think of a story to connect all words/expressions/grammar in question, etc. With weaker students, I can ask them to practice the material in similar patterns such as "I like swimming – He likes walking" or to create a story using my scenario.

Teacher 2: It's different each time, mainly depending on what the problem is. E.g. if the problem is understanding the task then I'd use paraphrasing, ICQs, CCQs, MCQs or translation from a stronger student to make it clear. If the task itself isn't well designed and is too easy/difficult, my first approach would be to put [students] in groups according to the difference in level needed for the completion of the task.

Another objective of the research was to look into the types of differentiation techniques implemented by the survey participants. The respondents characterised this aspect of their teaching practice in the following way: 22 % differentiate by **learners'** profiles, 8 % differentiate by interest, 21 % differentiate by readiness, 29 % do not differentiate in other ways, 21 % differentiate in other ways, but do not specify how.

Overall, the content analysis of contributions made by 25 teachers suggests that the majority of them (80 %) speak positively of differentiation as a model for effective learning maintaining that it stimulates **students'** productivity. On the other hand, one respondent **didn't** favour differentiation stating that it only **"humiliates students".** Those interviewees who valued the role of differentiation argued that task adaptation may deepen **students'** knowledge, boost their concentration levels and facilitate language acquisition:

Teacher 3: [Students] stop comparing themselves with peers and become more autonomous.

Teacher 4: Differentiating tasks enables students to progress with a proper speed, sparing them [from] the frustration of underperformance and facilitating the language acquisition.

Teacher 5: On the interpersonal level [students] might also feel cared for and happy that there's attention to their own needs in the lesson.

Admittedly, the large majority of the respondents recognized the positive effects of **differentiation and estimated that it does stimulate students' productivity and keeps learners** involved. Most of them would agree with Roland and Barber who consider differentiated support in **class as "helping students individually"** (Roland, Barber, 2016), which challenges more advanced learners and supports struggling ones.

Students' Views

Though the research on student grouping by attainment is abundant with quantitative analyses of the outcomes, it is sparse in student voices (Tereshchenko et al., 2019). As a result of **the paucity of case study material in this area, the present paper seeks to describe students'** attitudes towards the potential of homogeneous and heterogeneous classrooms and the overall impact of grouping strategies on academic achievement.

As stated in the methodology, the students came from a homogeneous educational setting which was, nevertheless, characterized by divergent ESL experience and prior training (Table 4). The respondents self-categorized their level of language proficiency in the following way: basic users (2 %), independent users (59 %), proficient users (35 %), and 4 % of the participants reported **having a 'plus' level (B2+)** (Table 4). Table 4 also enables us to observe almost equal proportions of students in mixed-ability (58 %) and same-ability (42 %) classrooms.

Table 4. Student Sample Description

Student Sample Description								
ESL Experience (n/%)			Estimated Level (n/%)				Grouping Format (n/%)	
2-4 years	5-7 years	8+ years	A1-A2	B1-B2	C1-C2	Other (B2-C1)	Mixed Ability	Same Ability
3 (3.4)	24 (27)	73 (69.6)	2 (2)	59 (59)	35 (35)	4 (4)	58 (58)	42 (42)

Following the theoretical framework outlined in the introduction, the survey aimed to reveal students' perception of how teachers differentiate learners' readiness, interest, or learning profiles.

Q4. Do your language sessions provide enough opportunity to speak/write about topics and experiences that are important and/or interesting to you?
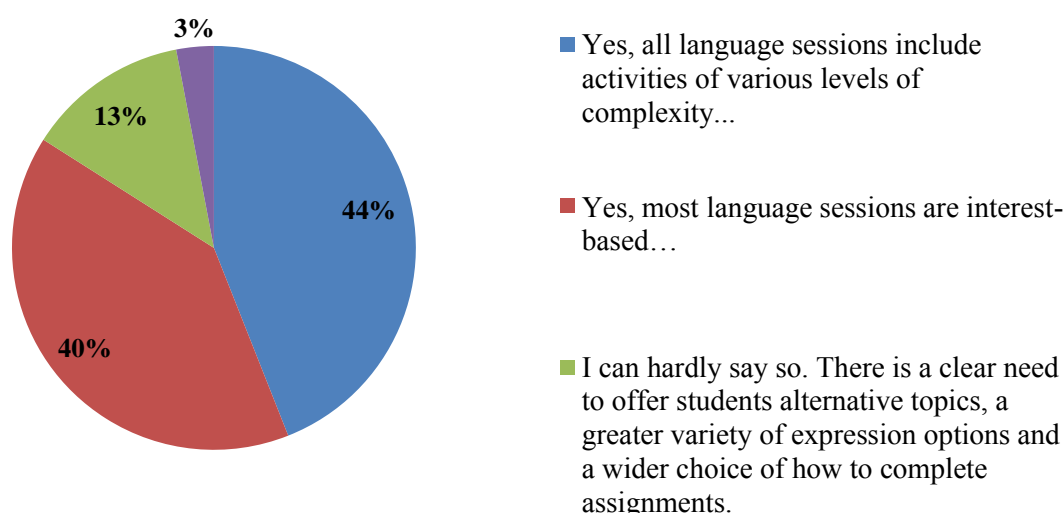

■ Yes, all language sessions include activities of various levels of complexity...

■ Yes, most language sessions are interest-based…

■ I can hardly say so. There is a clear need to offer students alternative topics, a greater variety of expression options and a wider choice of how to complete assignments.

Fig. 3. Differentiation by interest

The value of the Pearson Chi-Square test statistic for Figure 3 is 6.2. The p-value is 0.1. The critical $\chi 2_{0.05:3}$ value is 7.81, which indicates that the hypothesis drawn from the authors' theory is not disproved by empirical investigation.

In line with the expectations, the data suggest (Figure 3) that most students have "interest-based language sessions which include activities of various levels of complexity and meet their learning needs" (44 %). At the same time, a significant group of the respondents (40 %) reported "an objective necessity to create activities that meet students' needs and focus on real-world experience and application".

In terms of differentiation by instruction, most students were found to be never (37 %) or almost never (24 %) exposed to different tasks (such as…"Some of us will study … while some of us will …") when working on the same concept. Nevertheless, a large proportion of the respondents reported getting "adapted hand-outs for listening/reading tasks" (25 %), "different/adapted tasks for homework" (28 %), "more time to rehearse before a speaking task for weaker students" (27 %). Significantly, almost one-fifth of the students acknowledged that they encountered a lack of "that experience", "no adaptation" or "the same tasks for everyone".

Another objective of the survey was to detect whether students recognize how and when teachers differentiate by readiness. With regard to this aspect, it should be stressed that most learners are engaged in supervised practice and receive sufficient feedback from their language instructors. To give an example, 74 % of the respondents wrote that "teachers always practise re-teaching or reviewing key concepts and skills if the class finds it difficult to move on".

Considering the reasons for a possible lack of revision and expansion practice, some students mentioned time pressure and the syllabus structure:

Student 1: [I]n most subjects we and teachers find lack of time. Due to the syllabus set, rarely do we have enough of it to revise or have a question-answer clarification discussion. For the same reason there's often little opportunity for each of the students to air her/his opinion, as to revise the material by participating and both get the assessment points.

The next set of questions focused on the students' perception of various grouping strategies and aimed to elicit their attitude to the classroom management techniques exploited by the teachers. The current research has indicated that the respondents might have different experiences and views on grouping structures.

Q9. *Are you ever paired or grouped in your English lessons? To what extent do you think it helps*?

- Yes. Teachers effectively use flexible grouping techniques...
- Yes, sometimes...
- Hardly ever...
- I don't think that grouping or pairing students helps...
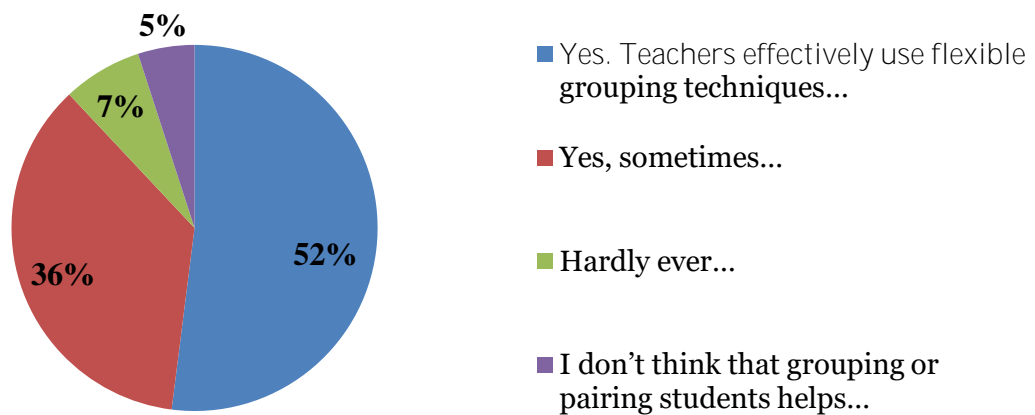
Fig. 4. Student grouping

The evidence displayed in Figure 4 shows that 52 % of the learners support teachers' effective use of "flexible grouping techniques enabling students to work in pairs, small groups, or alone which helps to develop a better understanding of the topic or concept and to work at an individual pace". Some 36 % mention that "grouping techniques do not always facilitate learning or contribute to a more positive learning environment". The other interviewees either report "a desperate need to engage students in group work which could help to develop a better understanding of the topic or concept" (7 %) or "don't think that grouping or pairing students helps to develop a better understanding of the topic or to work at an individual pace" (5 %).

The value of the Pearson Chi-Square test statistic for Figure 4 is 15.47. The p-value is 0.001. The critical $\chi2_{0.05:3}$ value is 7.81, which indicates that contrary to the research expectations, the respondents demonstrated sufficient knowledge of differentiation strategies.
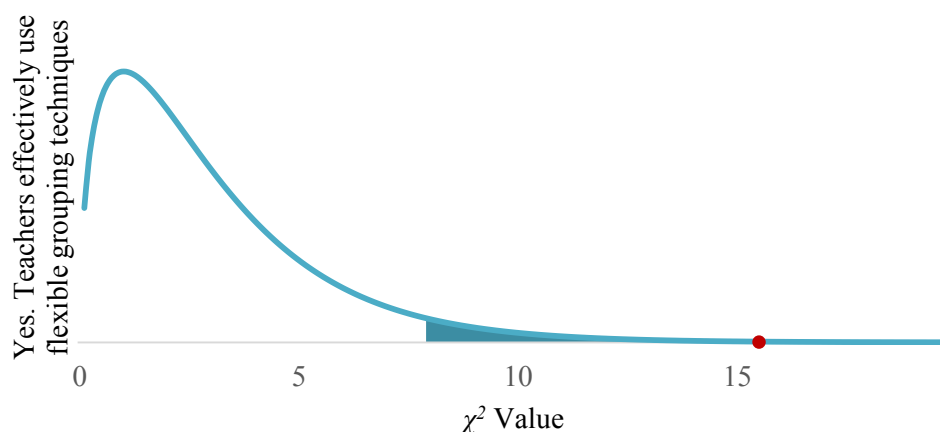
Fig. 5. *χ² Value*

The closing question of the survey aimed at eliciting the participants' ideas about the educational potential of mixed-ability classes. The results shown in Table 5 reveal students' perception of the teaching practice under analysis.

Table 5. Students' views on mixed-ability classrooms

	N (%)
Positive views on mixed-ability	47 (47)
Negative views on mixed-ability	34 (34)
Mixed views	12 (12)
No answer	7 (7)

The value of the Pearson Chi-Square test statistic for Table 5 is 5.80. The p-value is 0.12. The **critical $\chi2$** $_{0.05;3}$ **value is 7.81, which indicates that the hypothesis drawn from the authors'** theory is not disproved by empirical investigation.

The content analysis of contributions made by 100 B.Ed. students enables us to conclude that in replying to this question, the respondents demonstrated a diverse range of views on the grouping structures leading to greater achievements. In line with research expectations there seems to be **some evidence linking students' academic training and format preferences. Admittedly, in some** cases positive attitudes were found among low- and middle-achieving students with less previous experience in EFL (5-7 years as ELL, estimated B1-B2). It is notable that these responses speak in **favour of the students' awareness of mixed**-ability practices and their facilitation of student development and language acquisition, for example:

Student 2: I very much agree with the statement. Mixed ability classes provide the opportunity to communicate and help each other. Also it makes students more motivated.

Student 3: To my mind, it can stimulate other students.

Student 4: The difference in abilities help[s] students to improve their skills. For example, weaker students try to catch up with better experienced students. At the same time, more qualified students can practice their teaching or communication skills in explaining some material to weaker students.

Some students who appreciated mixed-ability learning at the same time felt frustrated by **those learners who usually didn't understand the material or didn't complete their homework.** **That's why it could take teachers longer to explain the material and manage the class. Stronger** students also admitted to getting more relaxed in the lesson as a result and distracted by helping weaker ones.

Simultaneously, a number of respondents recognize the educational potential of the mixed-ability classroom which is liable to widen the practical and theoretical perspectives of foreign language aptitude. It appears to be particularly crucial for the students receiving B.Ed. training as it gives them a clear and purposeful direction of the learning process:

Student 5: The difference in abilities help[s] students to improve their skills. For example, weaker students try to catch up with better experienced students. At the same time, more qualified students can practice their teaching or communication skills in explaining some material to weaker students.

As stated above, some 12 % of the respondents tend to take a mixed view on mixed-ability grouping. A representative example of such an approach to the notion in question as well as the risks it may involve is given below:

Student 6: I find this type of studying quite helpful, as weaker students, seeing a 'role model', may be motivated to improve their skills, whereas stronger students have more time to work on the topic. However, it can ruin student's motivation as well: some people among weaker students can become insecure about their abilities while studying in the same group with those who are stronger, and stronger students can become bored to wait for the others to catch up, so they will participate in classes less willingly.

By contrast, high achievers (10+ years as ELL, estimated C1-C2) mostly expressed negative remarks related to the practical implications of heterogeneous classes. Specifically, a lot of respondents highlighted that mixed-ability classes do not cater for the individual needs of stronger students. Instead, this practice may lead to lower concentration levels and loss of motivation:

Student 7: I don't think that students who are stronger should be mixed with those who are much weaker as they won't be motivated or interested in such learning.

Student 8: I am not really sure that mixed ability class[es] provide good opportunities for learning. While stronger students wait for weaker students to understand the material, weaker students will feel the pressure of being behind.

Student 9: In mixed classes I only feel my superiority and I don't think that it is good for weaker students, to see how someone succeeds and they don't.

Student 10: I don't think they do. It could seriously harm some students' self-esteem or their interest and they will be likely to lose motivation to study further.

Even so, we tend to agree that "it is possible, however, that effectively differentiated teaching in heterogeneous classes … could contribute to resolving the tensions between the higher attainers' individualistic orientations and their support for the learning and social benefits, and egalitarian principles of mixed-attainment grouping related to reduction of inequality" (Tereshchenko et al., 2019). Also, it is crucial for teachers to distinguish between 'mixed-ability *classes* and mixed-ability *teaching'* and in doing so to ensure differentiation by outcome with rich tasks and quality feedback – otherwise learners of all attainment levels will be left dissatisfied (Ibid.).

4. Discussion

The findings of the research uncovered the attitudes to the use of differentiation strategies in various methodological contexts in both secondary and tertiary school settings. The results indicate that the majority of the teachers apply a variety of management tools in different parts of the lessons and for different purposes in order to achieve elaborate educational results and infuse a growth-oriented mindset in the classroom (66.7 %). As in many works in this field (Kamarulzaman et al., 2017; Antonova, 2017; Tereshchenko et al., 2019), our study reports that the teacher's roles in differentiated classroom include encouraging students' independence, providing freedom of choice in learning, and monitoring.

With regard to the students' views on the notion in question, the research reveals broad patterns in learners' attitudes, including positive and negative reactions characterised by certain correlations between students' academic training and format preferences. 44 % of students find their teachers differentiate by interest. At the same time, a significant group of the respondents (40 %) never indicated differentiated instructions by their teachers, most students were found to be never (37 %) or almost never (24 %) exposed to different tasks.

Echoing Tereshchenko et al. (2019), this can be partially explained by the assumption that while paired learning and peer tutoring seem to be appreciated by many students, these strategies also present strong risks that teachers need to be attuned to, to avoid scenarios where same people always give or receive help. Cliché as it may sound, this stance echoes the 'common sense' view shared by most politicians, parents and teachers that students are best engaged in learning on their level of 'ability' (see Francis et al., 2017).

The comparative analysis of the teachers' and the students' views on the use of differentiation strategies is presented in Figure 5.
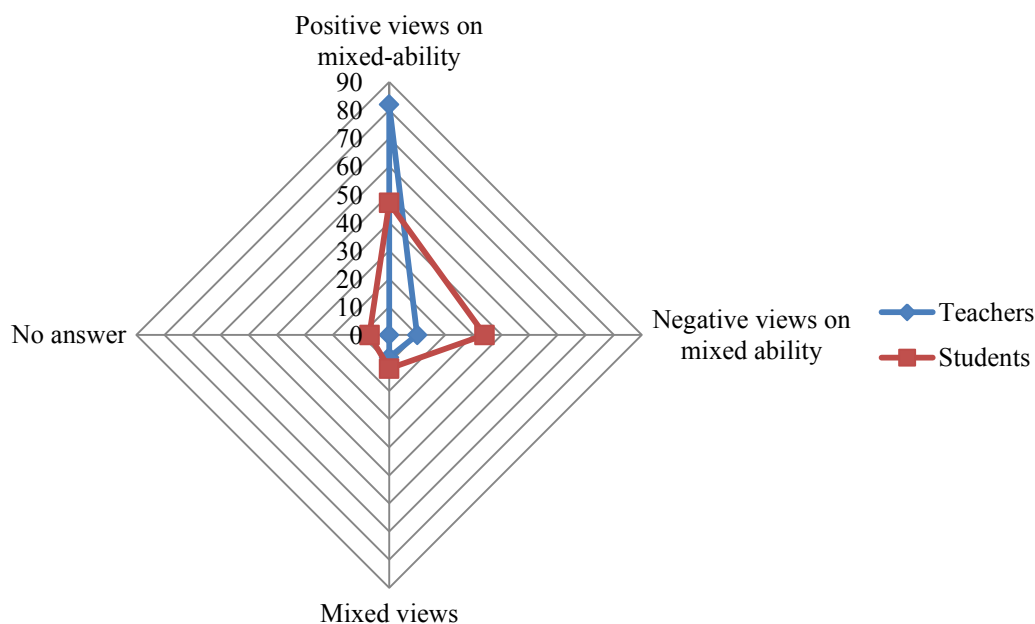

Fig. 5. Teachers' and students' attitude to differentiation

The value of the Pearson Chi-Square test statistic for Figure 5 is 30.387. The p-value is 0.01. **The critical χ2** $_{0.05;3}$ value is 11.345, which indicates that the relationship between factorial and performance characteristics is statistically significant.

According to the obtained results we may affirm that the questionnaire responses highlight the need for more information to be available to undergraduate students and language instructors about practicing differentiated instruction and placing learner differences as important. These key issues may need to be further addressed in the process of developing university courses and modules aimed at promoting the co-active and synergistic environment in the EFL classroom.

5. Conclusion

The research into various differentiation practices in the EFL mixed-ability classroom has significantly contributed to a better understanding of the issue under analysis in the Russian educational context.

The survey results enable us to conclude that:

1. Many of the interviewed educators reported to differentiate expertly and efficiently. 66.7 % of teachers differentiate by task in their lessons and the same significant percentage of educator 66.7 % differentiate by method. Most of the language instructors found differentiation **effective for boosting students' motivation and indispensable for the students to feel supported** during the lesson. The major role of differentiation techniques in the facilitation of language acquisition and the infusion a growth-oriented mindset in the classroom was recognized by the majority of the survey participants (80 %). Significantly, the diverse range of the reportedly used **differentiation techniques has been proven to be in line with the widely used worlds' practices.**

2. The **analysis of the learners' voices with regard to student grouping by attainment provided a better insight into students' views on differentiated tasks and to some extent challenged** the expectations of the research. Although the majority of the respondents tend to appreciate this teaching practice, this majority is rather narrow (47 %). While a relatively large number of the learners spoke positively about mixed-ability grouping due to its co-active and synergistic environment, some high achievers were frustrated by the preferential treatment of low-achieving students by teachers. The majority of the students, however, described mixed-ability grouping as limiting their individual academic progress.

3. Despite the aforementioned limitations of the study, the obtained results apparently **show a necessity for bringing students' awareness of differentiation strategies into focus and** enabling educators to challenge more advanced learners and support struggling ones. By way of implications for mixed-ability practice, the findings suggest that it is essential for language instructors to ensure differentiation by outcome with diverse activity types as well regular quality feedback, otherwise students of different attainment levels may be left dissatisfied. This leads us to combine the present findings with the scrutiny of the teaching B.Ed. students encounter in their major subjects in our forthcoming analysis.

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