Differentiated instruction in the EFL classroom: An interview study on Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers’ views and self-reported practices

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, there have been growing expectations for language teachers to use differentiated instruction (DI) in their classrooms to address the diverse needs of their students. Currently, however, relatively little is known about how teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) working in Hungarian public education view the concept of DI and implement it in practice. The present study sought to explore this question by interviewing eight Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers on their views and practices of DI. More specifically, the study strove to explore the participants’ understanding of and attitude towards DI as well as the differentiation strategies they report to use and the challenges and enablers they perceive when implementing DI. The data were subjected to template analysis. Results suggest that teachers have a solid understanding of the goals of DI and show a primarily positive attitude towards the approach but are less conscious about the strategies available to them and tend to differentiate mostly intuitively. They perceive challenges both in planning and delivering differentiated lessons, such as coping with increased preparation time and having to multitask in class. Exchanging good practices in formal and informal training sessions, cooperating with colleagues and parents, and having rearrangeable furniture and digital tools in the classrooms emerged as enablers of DI. Implications point toward the need for professional development opportunities that help teachers conceptualize their intuitive approaches and extend their repertoire of DI strategies. Researching how technology may enhance DI practices also appears to be warranted.

KEYWORDS

EFL teachers, differentiated instruction, professional development, interview study

INTRODUCTION

In line with a move from a one-size-fits-all approach to a more learner-centered view of language teaching, recent decades have seen a growing recognition of the importance of language teachers’ knowledge of their students and their ability to tailor their instruction to their students’ individual needs (Benson, 2012). This shift has resulted in an increased interest in the concept of differentiated instruction (DI), a teaching approach aimed at meeting the needs of all learners within academically diverse classrooms (Tomlinson, 1999).

In Hungary the importance of DI in teaching foreign languages (FLs) is highlighted in the National Core Curriculum (Government of Hungary, 2020) and DI appears as a measurement indicator in the quality evaluation system of Hungarian primary and secondary school teachers (Educational Authority, 2019). These suggest that teachers working in Hungarian public education and teaching FLs, including English as a foreign language (EFL), are expected to use DI in their lessons. Recent research on the DI-related beliefs and practices of Hungarian secondary school EFL teachers (Zólyomi, 2022) has shown, however, that educators find it challenging to implement DI and have low self-efficacy beliefs in the approach.
Further inquiry into the perspectives of primary and secondary school EFL teachers appears to be warranted at this point to determine the specific challenges teachers encounter when differentiating their instruction and to identify factors that may potentially enhance their day-to-day DI practices.

The present interview study aimed to address the above question by exploring how Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers view the concept of DI and how they describe their DI practices, with special regard to the strategies they use, the challenges they encounter, and the factors they consider as enablers of DI. It is hoped that the insights gained may add to our current understanding of Hungarian EFL teachers’ outlook on DI and of ways teachers could be assisted in responding to the needs of their students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Differentiated instruction

Rooted in the constructivist learning theories of the 1970s and 1980s, the idea of differentiation is based on the premise that learning occurs when students create their own understanding by building on what they already know (Marks, Woolcott, & Markopoulos, 2021; Smith & Throne, 2007). As students come to class with different experiences, needs and goals, their entry points to learning will differ too. DI is a teaching approach which aims to respond to this diversity by offering learners multiple “avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 1).

While DI entails a move away from a one-size-fits-all approach, it does not aim to provide each student with tailor-made tasks but to set up “resources and processes that allow learners to tailor-make tasks ... for themselves” (Benson, 2012, p. 34). As Tannent (2017) argues, DI needs to be an opportunity for students to “self-differentiate” (p. 6), i.e., to actively decide for themselves what degree of challenge they want. By making student choice integral to the learning process, the responsibility for development will be shared between the teacher and the learners (Tomlinson, 2004). Choice boards and learning centres are two examples of DI strategies that give students accountability for their learning (Blaz, 2016; Theisen, 2002).

According to Tomlinson (Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010), teachers can differentiate four curricular elements: the content (what students learn), the process (how learners make sense of the content), the product (how learners demonstrate and extend what they have learned), and the learning environment (the physical and affective climate in the classroom). These curricular elements can be differentiated along three types of learner differences: students’ interests (passions and affinities that motivate learning), learning profiles (including learning styles, intelligence preferences, gender, and cultural background) and readiness levels (students’ proximity to specified knowledge, understanding and skills). The idea of readiness draws from Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1978), which looks upon the learning process as a social and communicative act where students learn with the help of more knowledgeable others as they operate within their zone of proximal development (ZPD), i.e., the zone between their actual and potential developmental level. The goal of readiness-based DI is to provide students with tasks that are a bit more difficult than their actual developmental levels and, with support from peers and the teacher, help them overcome this difficulty and emerge from the task “at a new and more advanced level of readiness” (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 16). The concept of readiness encompasses various dimensions such as background knowledge, basic academic skills (e.g., problem solving), study skills (e.g., note-taking, time management), attitude and motivation (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012) and, in the case of FL teaching, target language proficiency (Borja, Soto, & Sanchez, 2015; Ortega, Cabrera, & Benalcázar, 2018; Tzanni, 2018).

As Erickson (2010) points out, one of the greatest merits of Tomlinson’s (1999) model is that it manages to break down the complex phenomenon of DI into comprehensible units in a theoretically sound yet pragmatic manner. In the past decades the model has served as a conceptual framework for practical guidebooks (e.g., Blaz, 2016; King-Shaver & Hunter, 2003; Smith & Throne, 2007) and empirical studies (e.g., Hustinx et al., 2019; Tzanni, 2018) alike.

Benefits, challenges, and enablers of DI

Empirical research on DI has revealed multiple benefits of the approach, including better academic achievement, increased student self-confidence, motivation, and engagement (e.g., Lewis & Ratts, 2005; McAdamis, 2001; McQuarrie & McRae, 2010). On the other hand, some characteristics of the approach are thought to render the implementation of DI rather challenging. As Blaz (2016) points out, in DI, “the bulk of the work is in the upfront planning”, which “does require additional time” (p. 161). Moreover, differentiated classrooms operate in a “workshop-style environment” (Blaz, 2016, p. 160), where “not every student is doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same way at exactly the same time” (Theisen, 2002, p. 2). Not all teachers may feel comfortable with working in such conditions, as it inevitably means that students are allowed some control over their own learning (Willard-Holt, 1994).

Providing teachers with training sessions where they can explore their DI-related views and learn about subject-specific approaches could be one way of enhancing the everyday implementation of DI (Whitley, Gooderham, Duquette, Orders, & Cousins, 2019). Teachers have also been advised to form cohort groups (Theisen, 2002) or professional learning communities (De Neve & Devos, 2016; Granás, 2019) at their schools to reflect on their experiences and exchange good practices. Building partnerships with parents by informing them about DI is another strategy to use (Theisen, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999). School administrators’ commitment to DI has been highlighted as an important
enabler too (Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006; Lewis & Batts, 2005; Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Finally, the potential of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for DI has also been discussed lately (Bourini, 2015), as ICT tools are thought to have some inherent features, such as the facilitation of self-paced and multisensory learning, that may aid the day-to-day implementation of DI (Benjamin, 2014; Zeng, 2020).

**EFL teachers’ views and practices of DI**

In the past years multiple studies examined EFL teachers’ views and practices of DI. These include mixed methods inquiries into the perspectives of Taiwanese primary school EFL teachers (Chien, 2015) and of secondary school EFL teachers working in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Bourini, 2015), a large-scale questionnaire study with Greek EFL teachers from the public and private sector (Tzanni, 2018) and an interview study with primary and secondary school teachers working at a private school in Turkey (Gülsen, 2018). More recently, Sougari and Mavroudi (2019) investigated the Greek primary school context in a mixed methods study, Granäs (2019) interviewed EFL teachers working at Norwegian primary and secondary schools, while Lombarkia and Guerza (2021) and Rovai and Pfingsthorn (2022) conducted questionnaire studies, with the former involving EFL teachers working in the Algerian tertiary context and the latter examining the DI-related beliefs of German pre-service EFL teachers.

The above studies focused on different research contexts and varied greatly in their research methodology, but they all agreed in their main conclusion: EFL teachers generally acknowledge the concept of DI, but they use the approach less frequently than their positive views would indicate. The mismatch between views and practices were traced back to various reasons. Firstly, many teachers appear to lack the methodological knowledge for implementing DI effectively (Bourini, 2015; Chien, 2015; Rovai & Pfingsthorn, 2022; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Tzanni, 2018), while the additional planning time required by DI was found to be a major challenge too (Bourini, 2015; Granäs, 2019; Gülsen, 2018; Lombarkia & Guerza, 2021; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Tzanni, 2018). Besides, some teachers find it difficult to multitask in differentiated settings (Gülsen, 2018) and have concerns that DI may lead to discipline issues (Bourini, 2015; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019). These problems are in accordance with the difficulties identified with DI in general (Blaz, 2016; Willard-Holt, 1994), and call for the exploration of ways EFL teachers could be better assisted in their DI endeavours.

**DI in the Hungarian context**

The importance of DI in FL teaching is highlighted in the National Core Curriculum (NCC), which serves as the central document to be consulted when planning the teaching of FLs in Hungarian public education (Öveges, 2014). The NCC states that FL teaching shall adopt a student-centred approach and create learning situations that take students’ age, background knowledge, interests, language proficiency and learning strategies into account (Government of Hungary, 2020). DI also features as a measurement indicator in the teacher career development model, which combines a quality evaluation and promotion system for Hungarian primary and secondary school teachers working in public education (Bükki, Domján, Köpeczi-Bócz, Kurucz, & Mártonfö, 2016).

A recent nationwide investigation into the context and efficiency of FL teaching in Hungarian public education (Öveges & Csizér, 2018) revealed insightful results, among others, on FL teachers’ views and practices of DI. The research project comprised of questionnaire studies examining the perspectives of the various stakeholders involved in FL teaching and learning in public education, including school administrators, teachers, students, and education consultants. As regards DI, it was found that while FL teachers see their capability to adapt to their students’ needs relatively positively, they rate the efficiency of their DI practices to be modest (Illés & Csizér, 2018). This was in line with the views of education consultants, who saw FL teachers’ DI endeavours to be moderately successful and named DI as one of the most important topics that need to be given more emphasis in teacher training (Kalmán & Tiboldi, 2018). The authors concluded that raising FL teachers’ awareness of DI may be necessary, but it is also possible that teachers are “very much aware of the necessity of DI, but, for some reason, cannot or do not want to use it in their daily practice” (Kálman & Tiboldi, 2018, p. 198).

This problem has recently been investigated in greater detail by Zólyomi (2022) in an interview study on the DI-related beliefs and self-reported strategies of Hungarian secondary school EFL teachers (N = 28). The author concluded that teachers regard DI to be an important instructional approach but find it challenging to implement in practice and have low self-efficacy beliefs in DI. The participants’ strategies were found to cater mostly for students’ readiness levels, while learning profiles and interests appeared as less typical dimensions of DI. At this point, further inquiry into the perspectives of both primary and secondary school EFL teachers appears to be warranted to explore the specific challenges educators encounter when implementing DI and to identify factors that may potentially enhance their DI practices.

**Rationale of the study and research questions**

EFL teachers in Hungarian public education are expected to use DI in their lessons, but few studies have investigated their views and practices of the approach with a specific focus on the perceived challenges and enablers of implementation. The present study sought to address this research gap by exploring, firstly, how Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers view the concept of DI, including their understanding of and attitude towards the approach, and, secondly, how they describe their practices of DI, with special regard to the strategies they use, the challenges they encounter, and the factors they consider as
enablers of DI. Differences between the participants’ views and practices based on their years of teaching experience may also be worthy of examination, as previous research on this question has yielded contradictory results. Some findings suggest that experienced teachers think less positively of DI than their novice colleagues (Whitley et al., 2019), while others have revealed no relationship between the two variables (Lindner, Alnahdi, Wahl, & Schwab, 2019; Shareefa, 2023) or found that teachers with more years of experience are in fact more likely to adopt DI than beginner teachers (Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017).

In line with the above aims, the study sought to answer two main research questions through the exploration of three and four sub-questions, respectively:

1. What are the views of Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers of the concept of differentiated instruction?
   1. What do Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers understand by the concept of differentiated instruction?
   2. What attitudes do Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers have towards the concept of differentiated instruction?
   3. Are there any differences between the participants’ views of differentiated instruction based on their years of teaching experience?
   4. How do Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers describe their practices of differentiated instruction?
   1. What strategies of differentiated instruction do Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers report to use?
   2. Are there any differences between the participants’ self-reported strategies of differentiated instruction based on their years of teaching experience?
   3. What challenges do Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers encounter when implementing differentiated instruction?
   4. What do Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers consider as enablers of differentiated instruction?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants

The study intended to explore the perspectives of teachers coming from a variety of teaching contexts. To this purpose, participants were selected through maximum variation sampling, a type of purposive sampling which searches for “individuals who cover the spectrum of positions and perspectives in relation to the phenomenon one is studying” (Palys, 2008, p. 697). The characteristics in terms of which the study sought to reach heterogeneity included the teaching context (primary and secondary schools, monolingual and bilingual schools as well as vocational and grammar schools), the years of teaching experience and the geographical location of the participants. The participants’ background data are shown in Table 1.

Eight teachers, six females and two males, participated in the study. They represent different age groups and have a teaching experience ranging from 1 to 33 years. All of them have a degree in teaching EFL, and three of them are teachers of another subject as well (Hungarian, Hungarian as a FL, German as a FL). At the time of the interviews, five participants were teaching at schools located in the capital, Budapest, and two of them were working in the countryside (Pécs and Vác). One of the participants quit public education in 2021 but had been working at secondary schools in Budapest for a considerable time. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ mother tongue (Hungarian).

The instrument

A new interview schedule was developed for this study based on the consulted literature on DI and following the guidelines proposed by Dörnyei (2007) and Richards (2003). The schedule was based on a semi-structured format, i.e., it comprised of grand tour questions and possible follow-up questions that invited the participants to elaborate on the issues in an exploratory fashion (Dörnyei, 2007). The first draft of the schedule was reviewed by the researcher in two rounds, then subjected to peer review, based on which the order of some of the grand-tour and follow-up questions was changed and a few ambiguous questions were reworded. The schedule was piloted with a participant in March 2022, upon which one grand tour question, which generated redundant responses, was deleted. The revised schedule was piloted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Teaching experience in public education</th>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>City</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anett</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Secondary grammar school</td>
<td>Budapest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Secondary grammar school</td>
<td>Budapest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td>Secondary vocational and grammar school</td>
<td>Budapest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cintia</td>
<td>33 years</td>
<td>Secondary vocational and grammar school</td>
<td>Vác</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gellért</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Primary and secondary grammar school</td>
<td>Budapest</td>
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<td>Gréta</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Bilingual primary and secondary grammar school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lilla</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>Pécs</td>
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<td>Patrik</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Bilingual secondary grammar school</td>
<td>Budapest</td>
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with another participant. The flow of the conversation and the depth and breadth of the data, two criteria to be assessed during the validation of interviews (Dörnyei, 2007), were found to be satisfactory, and thus the schedule was deemed to be suitable for use in the main study.

The schedule started with an introduction, followed by some questions about the participants’ professional background. The content questions were organized around two topics: the participants’ views of the concept of DI (their understanding of and attitude towards the concept) and their practices of DI, with special regard to the strategies they use, the challenges they encounter and the factors they consider as enablers of DI. The English translation of the interview guide is attached in Appendix A.

Methods of data collection and analysis

Careful steps were taken to ensure the ethical conduct of the study. First an application form for ethics approval was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the PhD Programme within which the present study was carried out as part of the author’s doctoral research. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about the research topic, were assured anonymity, and made aware of their right to opt out of the study at any point. Informed consent was obtained from the participants to record the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ anonymity, and the collected data were kept confidential and stored in a safe place accessible only to the researcher.

The interviews took place between March and July in 2022. One interview was conducted in person upon the participant’s request, while the rest took place online. The average length of the interviews was 35 min. The sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in a dataset of 27,444 words.

The data were subjected to template analysis (TA), a type of thematic analysis, following the guidelines proposed by King (2012). In TA, an initial template of themes is constructed based on the literature and on the coding of a subset of the data, which is then applied, modified, and re-applied through an iterative and reflexive process. As such, TA is positioned in the middle ground between top-down and bottom-up styles of qualitative analysis, i.e., it allows for the generation of a priori themes with the flexibility to redefine or discard any of these themes and to generate new ones as the analytic process unfolds (King, 2012). This approach was deemed suitable for the purposes of the present study as it facilitated the identification of evidence in the data for predefined patterns by handling themes as ‘inputs’, but also allowed room for new themes to be developed as analytic ‘outputs’ (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the present study, five overarching a priori themes were identified, which corresponded to the research questions of the study, and each had sub-themes drawn from the consulted theoretical and empirical literature. The a priori themes and sub-themes are shown in Table 2.

Data were analysed using qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti 8.4.3. The first transcript was given close reading and any section that appeared to address ideas relevant to the research questions were coded. Next, the codes were clustered into groups, which were checked against the a priori themes, and were either assigned to these themes or were labelled under new themes. This preliminary template was then applied and refined during the coding of the rest of the transcripts in a recursive manner. The emerging structure was displayed in a “mind-map” (King, 2012, p. 433) to indicate the hierarchical and lateral relationships between the thematic clusters. The thematic map and the first draft of the results and discussion section of the paper were subjected to peer debriefing, upon which some thematic clusters were further refined in light of the feedback received from a trusted and knowledgeable colleague (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). The final thematic map is attached in Appendix B.

 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers’ views of DI

Solid understanding of the goals of DI. Participants defined the concept of DI in a similar way as they all construed it as a teaching approach that aims to cater for learners’
individual needs. While they used words with slightly different meaning, such as “taking into account” (Patrik), “responding to” (Anett) or “attending to” (Lilla), these formulations converge in identifying learner differences as the starting point of DI, i.e., that “teachers begin where students are” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2).

The responses included all three types of learner differences identified in Tomlinson’s (1999) model, i.e., students’ readiness, interests, and learning profiles (including students’ learning styles and cultural background). As for readiness, students’ level of English emerged as the most distinct category, but some teachers highlighted the importance of students’ mood too, i.e., “how a specific student is feeling on a specific day” (Cintia). This echoes Tennant’s (2017) reasoning about the importance of understanding and empathising with “how we are all different and can also be individually different from day-to-day or moment-to-moment” (p. 6), and suggests that some of the participants acknowledge the situational, ever-evolving nature of readiness as opposed to the notion of ability, which connotes a more or less fixed trait (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

What is equally noteworthy is that two teachers emphasized students’ role in taking responsibility for their development in a differentiated classroom. As Gellért, a relatively novice teacher put it, DI means “providing a learning environment where students can develop on their own”. Cecilia, one of the most experienced teachers, argued in a similar vein when she pointed out that in many schools the implementation of DI tends to be “too teacher-centred”:

[DI as practiced today] means that I, the teacher, I will handle all the learner differences … but I think it should be the other way round … we should start with the students and show them some learning paths that they can take.

Her thoughts are in accordance with what Tennant (2017) saw as a paramount issue in DI: “the question of who makes the choices” (p. 6). As he argues, if all decisions about DI are made exclusively by the teachers and students are not allowed to “self-differentiate” (p. 6), DI can easily lead to exclusion rather than inclusion. Cecilia seemed to adopt this reasoning by pointing out how DI, if not implemented properly, may just simply result in “segmentation”.

The above suggests that the interviewees, irrespective of their years of teaching experience, all seem to have a solid understanding of the learner differences that constitute one of the two dimensions in Tomlinson’s (1999) model, and they interpret DI as an approach that concerns every student, not just “outliers” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 5). This is a notable outcome considering that the misconception about DI being necessary only for gifted or struggling learners has been found to be persistent among teachers (Whiteley et al., 2019). Some participants also seem to agree that in differentiated settings the responsibility for development is shared between the teacher and the learner, which is indeed one of the main tenets of DI (Tomlinson, 2004; Willard-Holt, 1994). On the other hand, the curricular areas to be differentiated, i.e., the other dimension of Tomlinson’s (1999) model, was not elaborated on by any of the interviewees. This may suggest that while participants look upon learner differences as an organizing principle of DI, they may be less conscious about the specific instructional paths that they can take to cater for these differences. This is in line with the findings of Whiteley et al. (2019), which showed that teachers have difficulty describing DI purposes and practices in detail and may not recognise these as part of a larger DI framework. The themes and sub-themes related to participants’ understanding of DI are shown in Fig. 1.

**Ambivalent attitude towards the concept of DI.** The interviewees’ responses revealed an ambivalent attitude towards the concept of DI. On the one hand, participants acknowledged that DI is part and parcel of the contemporary discourse on language pedagogy. Except for Cecilia and Gréta, who got their teaching degree in 1989 and 1990, respectively, all participants learned about the concept during their pre-service training, although mainly from a theoretical perspective. Several interviewees reported to have come across the concept at conferences too. They agreed that DI has secured a firm place in professional discourse; it is “part of common knowledge” (Gréta), a “buzzword” (Gellért) “floating around” (Lilla). Most of the teachers appeared to be appreciative of the benefits of the approach too. As they pointed out, if implemented the right way, DI can increase students’ engagement (Anett, Bella, Patrik), motivation (Bella, Cintia), and self-confidence (Bella), which are benefits mentioned in the literature as well (e.g., Lewis & Batts, 2005; McAdams, 2001; McQuarrie & McRae, 2010).

On the other hand, the teachers elaborated on some negative aspects as well. They considered the implementation of DI to be rather difficult or in some cases even “impossible” (Gellért). As Bella put it, “it is a nice concept, but it is really difficult to implement in practice”. Cecilia was of the same opinion: “teachers would practice it, but they simply don’t have the time and the means to do so”. The feeling of not having the correct means, i.e., the problem of methodological uncertainties was echoed in Gellért’s response too: “I hear it all the time, but I am never sure how it should be done or whether I am doing it the right way”.

Moreover, Cintia and Gréta, two teachers with considerable experience in teaching, expressed some uneasiness over being pressured to use DI. Cintia said that the concept of DI “annoys” her because it’s being forced upon teachers. As she put it, “there is nothing wrong with the underlying idea of DI” but the way it is often put into practice and added that “DI should be taught more seriously” because “if we just read a couple of things and say that DI is very important well … a lot of damage can be done if teachers don’t know what it
really is”. This was in line with the opinion of Gréta, who looked upon DI as a “forced trend”, a necessity that was born out of the reality of having mixed-level FL classes in Hungarian public education, and said she was “very pessimistic” whether DI can be put into practice meaningfully.

The participants’ mixed feelings are consistent with the findings of earlier studies (Bourini, 2015; Chien, 2015; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Tzanni, 2018; Zólyomi, 2022); these all concluded that EFL teachers generally acknowledge the importance of DI but have worries about the actual implementation and have rather low self-efficacy beliefs in DI. Feeling pressured to use DI had not been anticipated to feature as a theme prior to the analysis, but the interviewees’ responses indicate that this may in fact be an additional issue that needs to be addressed, especially in the case of teachers who have been in the profession for many years and may rightly feel resistant to external pressures for change. This is in line with earlier results showing that teachers’ years of teaching experience may be negatively related with their beliefs in DI (Whitley et al., 2019), and highlights the necessity of professional development opportunities that demystify the concept of DI by bringing real-life examples of effective DI strategies into their curriculum. This would be instrumental in raising teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs in DI, which could in turn increase their willingness to implement the approach (Whitley et al., 2019). The themes and sub-themes describing the participants’ attitude towards DI are presented in Fig. 2.

**Teachers’ self-reported practices of DI**

**A variety of intuitive DI strategies.** Although most of the participants expressed a degree of methodological uncertainty concerning the implementation of DI, they reported to be differentiating in a variety of forms. The way they described their practices was in line with how they construed the concept of DI, i.e., they focused primarily on the dimensions of learner differences that they reported to be attending to. The related themes and sub-themes are shown in Fig. 3.

The most distinct individual difference participants reported to be addressing was learners’ readiness level, more specifically, learners’ English proficiency, which is in accordance with earlier findings from the Hungarian context (Zólyomi, 2022). Several strategies were mentioned among which the use of supplementary tasks emerged as the most popular one. Fast finishers often read an English magazine or graded reader (Anett, Cintia, Gellért), play vocabulary games on their phones (Bella), or work as the teacher’s assistant (Gellért). Learners who struggle with a certain material are given explanation in the lesson or during the breaks, or are assigned practice tasks as homework (Bella, Lilla, Gréta). Gellért reported using the strategy of tiering too, i.e., creating multiple versions of a task pitched at different levels of difficulty. Usually, he determines who works on which version, but sometimes he lets students decide which task to complete.

Attending to learners’ different levels of English appeared in some assessment practices as well. These included giving students personalized oral or written feedback (Anett, Bella, Cintia) and gamifying assessment with a point-collection system (Anett, Patrik). As Anett explained, gamification gives room for meaningful feedback as each student can be evaluated against their own progress. Patrik was of a similar opinion as he said that gamification “places much more emphasis on attitude than on lexical knowledge” and creates a transparent system that encourages students to take responsibility for their progress. The potential of gamification for DI was identified in earlier studies (Zólyomi, 2022) too, and as such appears to be an area worthy of further exploration. The question has been investigated in the context of chemistry and mathematics teaching in primary and secondary education (e.g., Salleh, Rauf, Saat, & Ismail, 2022; Smith, 2018; Villamor & Lapinid, 2022) and at the tertiary level with regard to law studies (Seah, 2020) and teaching English for medical sciences (Khazaei & Ketabi, 2023), but in the domain of TEFL the possible links between gamification and differentiation are yet to be explored.

Finally, some teachers referred to grouping as a means of differentiating by readiness. Anett changes the seating arrangement every week, which she considers as “a type of differentiation because students have to work with different
partners”. Cintia, Gellért, and Patrik also reported using grouping for DI purposes. These suggest that the participants acknowledge the importance of flexible grouping, i.e., letting students be part of many different groups, which is in fact one of the essential components of DI (Blaz, 2016). Differentiation by students’ interest was also identified in some responses. As Anett, Cintia and Patrik pointed out, personalized discussion questions and student presentations are two options that can give room for learners to engage with topics that they are genuinely interested in. Such tasks can make students “much more enthusiastic” (Anett); “their eyes light up” (Cintia) and “they are happy to hold the entire lesson” (Patrik).

Some teachers reported to be differentiating by students’ learning profile too. Gellért, for example, strives to present the content and instructions through multiple modalities to cater for the needs of “both visual and auditory learners”. Cecilia mentioned the importance of letting her students choose the grouping arrangement they wish to work in. As she explained:

I ask them whether anyone would like to work alone. And then there will be students who would like to work in groups of three and others will prefer to work alone. I have never been asked this question. Does differentiation happen this way? Yes, it does.

Cecilia considered her students’ socio-economic background to be another important factor. As she explained, she cannot expect all her students to complete their homework digitally, for example, as some of them may not have the equipment to be able to do so. Therefore, her strategy in such cases is to give students various options for completing the task:

So, I tell them that they can choose and then it’s not awkward and it’s not like “well, you are not able to do this so let’s figure out something else”. Instead, there are three tasks, and I ask them to choose one. And then it’s not embarrassing. Some students will write the composition by hand, and it will be just as fine as doing a digital storytelling.

Inviting students to choose either the grouping arrangement or the mode of task completion is part of an essential element of DI: sharing responsibility with students in terms of decision-making, i.e., letting students "tailor-make tasks" for themselves (Benson, 2012, p. 34). Gellért and Patrik also mentioned the importance of involving students in the decision-making process, for example, by negotiating what extra assignments advanced students could take on. As Blaz (2016) argues, explaining to students what is happening in terms of DI and asking for their input is an important aspect of differentiation, since “students are usually responsive to a classroom that they know has been designed for them” (p. 26).

Three conclusions may be drawn from the above. Firstly, teachers seem to resonate well with their students’ individual needs and find it important to attend to these needs. In fact, when the participants were asked to share what they think their strengths were, most of them mentioned that they “have a good grasp on where students are” (Gellért) and are “responsive to their differences” (Patrik), which is in line with what teachers disclosed in Illés and Csizér’s (2018) report. Secondly, certain hallmarks of DI, such as flexible grouping and the involvement of students in decision-making appear to be used by some of the teachers, regardless of teaching experience. This may be seen as a favourable outcome as earlier studies found these aspects of DI to be only scarcely practiced (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Tzanni, 2018).

On the other hand, most of the strategies seem to be intuitive rather than planned. Assigning extra tasks to fast finishers, providing on-the-spot explanations for struggling learners, giving personalized oral and written feedback and giving room for students to converse about or present on topics of their interests were the most popular strategies used by novice and more experienced teachers alike, while offering tiered activities in the form of learning centres or choice boards, a DI strategy traditionally cited in the literature (Blaz, 2016; Theisen, 2002), was mentioned only sporadically. Terms used by the participants such as “spontaneous” (Anett), “instinctive” (Cintia) and “improvisational” (Bella) are also indicative of a primarily intuitive approach to DI. This is in line with Tzanni’s (2018) results, which showed that teachers tend to address their learners’ differences “reactively” rather than “proactively” (p. 162).

Challenges of DI. The participants mentioned various concerns related to the planning and delivery of differentiated lessons. Besides these two a priori themes, the challenge of building trust among students was also identified as an issue that teachers find important to address. The themes and sub-themes are presented in Fig. 4.

There was unanimous agreement among the participants, irrespective of their years of teaching experience, that devising lessons with DI in mind increases preparation time to a great extent, which is in line with the findings of studies conducted in other contexts (Bourini, 2015; Granås, 2019; Gülseren, 2018; Lombarkia & Guerza, 2021; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Tzanni, 2018; Zólyomi, 2022). As the interviewees put it, planning DI requires “a lot of extra work and preparation” (Bella) which is “a bit tiring sometimes” (Anett) and “awfully time-consuming” (Gellért). The workload is further increased by the cognitive challenge of having to think about the lesson in multiple yet converging dimensions. In Bella’s words:

![Fig. 4. Challenges of DI. Note: Solid lines indicate hierarchical relationships, dotted lines show lateral relationships.](image-url)
I need to think about the lesson in as many dimensions as I would like to differentiate in. And I need to prepare activities for the children in a way that these ultimately come together in terms of the topic or the grammar we are focusing on.

Three interrelated difficulties were mentioned in terms of the delivery of differentiated lessons: the multitasking nature of in-class work, the challenges of time management and the danger of losing students’ attention. Novice and experienced teachers alike believe that managing a differentiated class is “very tiring” (Bella) as it means “continuous multitasking” and “jumping between different tasks” (Gréta), with teachers “having to divide their attention” (Lilla, Gellért) and time management being “turned upside down” (Patrik). In such circumstances DI may easily result in “losing some students” (Gréta) or even cause discipline issues (Bella). These fears are in line with what previous studies identified as challenges of the “workshop-style environment” (Blaz, 2016, p. 160) of differentiated classrooms (Bourini, 2015; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019) and highlight the need for equipping teachers with practical tips on how to manage such settings.

An additional concern pertains to the challenge of building trust among students. Most teachers agreed that advanced learners see it positively if they are given extra attention, but those who work more slowly “will not necessarily know that this is because of differentiation, and they may perceive it as if the teacher liked those students [who work faster] more” (Lilla). Participants believed that giving different tasks to students is a “sensitive issue” (Bella), one that may generate “exclusion” (Patrik), which is, in fact, what has been identified as one of the biggest dangers of differentiation (Tennant, 2017). Gréta said that students sometimes are just simply not tolerant towards each other, and this is the main reason she does not believe in the concept of DI. Anett, Gellért and Patrik were more optimistic as they believed that fostering empathy among students can lay the foundations for DI. Either way, investing time and energy in building trust among students and creating a sense of community, which is one of the main pillars of differentiated teaching (Blaz, 2016), was a challenge that several teachers seemed to be preoccupied with.

**Enablers of DI.** Besides discussing their challenges, participants shared ideas on what they perceived as enablers of DI. All of the pre-defined themes were identified in their answers, with some of these themes being narrowed down or broadened with additional sub-themes to better reflect the patterns observed in the responses. Figure 5 shows the related themes and sub-themes.

The most apparent theme pertained to professional development. Cecília, who showed dissatisfaction with how DI is practiced currently, said that the methodology of DI should be taught in greater depth in pre-service teacher training. Cintia and Lilla would appreciate more in-service training opportunities, especially workshops where teachers can learn “small hands-on ideas” (Cintia). These views are consistent with the results of research conducted in other countries (Gülsen, 2018; Tzanni, 2018; Whitley et al., 2019) as well as with the conclusions of Kálmán and Tiboldi (2018) and Zólyomi (2022), who both highlighted that the methodology of DI should be given more emphasis in teacher training in Hungary.

Knowledge sharing among EFL colleagues was identified as another distinct sub-theme. Anett, Bella, Gellért and Patrik, who are relatively novice teachers, said that they frequently ask for their colleagues’ advice as “one can learn immensely” from peers (Patrik). Teachers with more years of experience, such as Cecília and Cintia, were also very much in favour of getting advice from colleagues; as Cecília put it, “seeing good practices in action is what has worked best” for her. Regardless of their years of teaching experience, all participants articulated a wish for platforms of informal knowledge sharing, which is close to what Theisen (2002) referred to as cohort groups where teachers can “problem-solve as a group” and “learn new ideas in a professional, supportive setting” (p. 6).

The second theme concerned the importance of cooperation with third parties. This included, firstly, the cooperation with the teaching staff and administrators. Patrik and Gellért said that the concept of DI should be embraced by all members of the school community so that teachers can experiment with DI in a “supportive environment” (Gellért). Besides, as Cintia pointed out, it is good for teachers of different subjects to exchange information about students:

> If I ask about the children then I will be able to differentiate more effectively because I will know what the children’s strengths and weaknesses are, or, for example, how good a certain student is at drawing … I think it is definitely helpful to learn about the student outside my classes too. … We should look at the child holistically.

Gellért spoke about the importance of cooperation with parents as well, especially in the case of students with special

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**Fig. 5.** Enablers of DI. Note: Solid lines indicate hierarchical relationships, dotted lines show lateral relationships.
educational needs. As he explained, parents may feel that DI is about “stigmatization” and therefore communicating with them is of crucial importance. This is in line with the argument stating that parents may see DI as being unfair or giving privileges to certain students, and therefore informing them about pedagogical decisions is an essential step in securing the effective implementation of DI (Theisen, 2002).

The third theme pertained to the facilities at schools, which encompassed three aspects. Firstly, many participants found it essential for classroom furniture to be rearrangeable. Cintia said that she is “more creative” if she “can make students move” and “it is much better for everyone else too”. Having coursebooks that are “multifaceted” (Cintia) and provide “more options for staging” (Cecilia) emerged as another sub-theme. Anett would appreciate it if “not everything had to be devised by the teacher, everything that is creative, everything that is differentiated, everything that is exciting”. This finding is consistent with that of Sougari and Mavroudi (2019), who emphasized the role of differentiated materials in eliminating “teachers’ preoccupation with materials design” (p. 411). Finally, and in accordance with Bourini’s (2015) findings, some teachers highlighted the importance of ICT tools in enhancing DI. As Gellért put it, mobile learning “can often make differentiation easier” because students go online and “can do different things right away”, which may, to an extent, rectify the problem of not having enough differentiated materials in coursebooks. Anett appreciated the role of ICT tools in helping learners manage their own learning process. These remarks corroborate earlier views on the possible affordances of technology for DI (Benjamin, 2014; Zeng, 2020) and call for further exploration of how this potential may be harnessed in the EFL classroom.

CONCLUSION

The present interview study investigated the views and self-reported practices of Hungarian primary and secondary school EFL teachers concerning the concept of DI. More specifically, the study strove, firstly, to explore the participants’ understanding of and attitude towards DI, and, secondly, to identify the DI strategies the participants report to use, the challenges they encounter and the factors they consider as enablers of DI.

As for the first research question, the findings suggest that the participants have a clear understanding of the concept of DI in terms of the individual differences it can cater for but are less conscious about the instructional aspects of the approach, i.e., the specific strategies that may be used in differentiated settings. Furthermore, they acknowledge the rationale of DI and appreciate the benefits it may hold for students, but the methodological uncertainties, the difficulties of implementation and the feeling of being pressured to differentiate, the latter being especially true for teachers with more years of experience, result in an ambivalent attitude towards the concept.

The second research question examined participants’ self-reported practices of DI, the outcomes of which also showed a degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, regardless of teaching experience, all teachers demonstrated a genuine interest in catering for their students’ individual needs, and they seemed to interpret these needs broadly, ranging from levels of proficiency to interests, learning styles, and socio-economic backgrounds. Certain hallmarks of DI, such as flexible grouping and the involvement of students in decision-making also seem to be practiced by some interviewees. On the other hand, most of the self-reported strategies appear to be intuitive and spontaneous rather than planned. Assigning supplementary tasks to advanced and struggling learners, giving personalized feedback, and inviting students to discuss or present on topics of their interests were by far the most frequently mentioned practices, whereas differentiation strategies traditionally mentioned in the literature, such as learning centres or choice boards (Blaz, 2016; Theisen, 2002), were scarcely reported as being used.

Novice and experienced teachers both gave account of several DI-related challenges. Some of these pertain to planning, such as coping with increased preparation time and having to devise lessons in multiple dimensions. Other difficulties concern the delivery of differentiated lessons, such as multi-tasking, time management constraints and the problem of losing students’ attention. Socializing learners into the “workshop-style environment” (Blaz, 2016, p. 160) of differentiated classrooms and building trust was also found to be challenging. These problems are in line with previous findings on EFL teachers’ experiences of DI (Bourini, 2015; Granás, 2019; Gülsen, 2018; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Tzanni, 2018; Zólyomi, 2022) and they may also provide tentative explanation for why teachers in Illés and Csízer’s (2018) report saw their capability to resonate with their students’ individual needs relatively positively but still perceived their differentiation practices to be only moderately effective.

On the other hand, various themes were identified with respect to the potential enablers of DI. The most apparent enabler pertained to professional development, with almost all teachers expressing their interest both in attending formal training sessions and sharing best practices with colleagues informally. Cooperation with the wider teaching staff and parents was deemed important too as it could help teachers receive essential information about students and experiment with DI in a supportive environment. The third factor concerned the facilities, including rearrangeable furniture and a higher number of differentiated materials. The role of ICT tools in enhancing differentiation was also pointed out by some participants.

The results may have implications for practice and research alike. Firstly, there seems to be need for more training events that encourage teachers to reflect on their intuitive DI practices. As it became apparent from the interviews, teachers are highly attentive to their students’ needs and seek to differentiate accordingly, but their instructional choices, as was pointed out by some of the participants themselves, tend to be instinctive rather than proactively planned. Workshops that follow an experience-
based model may be of help for teachers to “formalize their intuitive strategies and use them consciously” (Ramani, 1987, p. 9). In response to the challenges reported on by the participants, pre- and in-service training sessions could also be designed to equip teachers with practical ideas on how to plan differentiated lessons in a multidimensional yet time-efficient manner and on ways of fostering an inclusive learning environment conducive to differentiated teaching. Besides, sharing real-life examples of effective differentiation strategies could go a long way towards demystifying the concept of DI and easing the tension that teachers may feel over being expected to use the approach.

In addition, as teachers find it essential to exchange good practices and student information with their immediate colleagues, establishing platforms for intra-institutional collaboration appear to be highly warranted. The role of school administrators, whose support is a “nonnegotiable item for systemic change” (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000, p. 59), may be pivotal in fostering such fora of cooperation. Finally, the practical difficulties teachers experience in planning and managing differentiated lessons warrant further research on possible ways of enhancing differentiation, and the role ICT may play in this respect appears to be an area especially worthy of investigation.

The present interview study has limitations. Firstly, as the analysis was based on self-reported data, possible discrepancies between the participants’ actual and reported practices remain an issue. Triangulating data by observing the teachers’ lessons and examining their lesson plans could provide a more in-depth understanding of the practices in question. Secondly, the results need to be interpreted with caution as the sample size (N = 8) allows only for limited transferability. The distribution of and relationship between the constructs explored in the present research project may be investigated in a subsequent questionnaire study, which could provide a larger-scale overview of EFL teachers’ views and self-reported practices of DI. Notwithstanding these limitations, it is hoped that the outcomes of the present study may add to our current understanding of Hungarian EFL teachers’ perspectives on DI and of some ways teachers could be assisted in meeting the diverse needs of their learners.

REFERENCES


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First, I would like to ask you a few biographical questions.

1. When were you born?
2. What kind of teaching qualifications do you have and when did you get these?
3. How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching English?
4. Where did you teach prior to your current position?
5. Do you teach other subjects besides English? If yes, what are these subjects?
6. In what grades do you teach English this term? How old are your students?

Now I would like to ask some general questions about differentiated instruction. As I have mentioned before, there are no right or wrong answers, I am interested in what you think about this concept.

1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the phrase ‘differentiated instruction’?
2. How do you define the concept of differentiated instruction?
3. When did you first hear about the concept of differentiated instruction?
   a. To what extent did you have an opportunity to learn about the concept during your university studies? In what courses did you learn about the concept?
   b. Have you participated in teacher training events focusing on differentiated instruction? If yes, could you please share your experiences about it?
   c. Are there any other sources you consult to gain information about the concept of differentiated instruction? If yes, what are these?
4. What do you think are some possible advantages and disadvantages of using differentiated instruction in the EFL class?
   a. What may be some advantages and disadvantages from the students’ perspective?
   b. What may be some advantages and disadvantages from the teachers’ perspective?
5. In general, to what extent do you find it important to use differentiated instruction in the EFL lessons?
   a. In what cases do you find it important to use differentiated instruction?
   b. What are some cases when you think it is not important to use differentiated instruction?

Thank you. Now I am going to ask you some questions about your experience with implementing differentiated instruction.

6. Can you think of an example when you used differentiated instruction in your lesson? If yes, could you please describe what it looked like?
7. Are there any strategies that have proven to be useful for you in differentiating your instruction?
   a. Why do you think these strategies are suitable for differentiation purposes?
8. What is your opinion on using ICT tools for differentiation purposes?
a. Have you ever used ICT tools for differentiation purposes? If yes, could you please describe what it looked like?

9. What are your experiences with the implementation of differentiated instruction?
   a. What feedback do you get from your students?
   b. How do you feel when you use differentiated instruction?

10. What challenges do you experience in connection with differentiated instruction?
    a. What challenges do you experience when planning a differentiated activity?
    b. What challenges do you experience when delivering a differentiated activity?
    c. What challenges do you experience with differentiated assessment?
    d. Why do you think these challenges occur?

11. What aspects of differentiated instruction do you find easy to implement?
    a. Why do you think these aspects are easy to implement?

12. What factors do you think could help language teachers to use differentiated instruction effectively?
    a. Which factors are present in your teaching context?
    b. What are some factors that have yet to be established in your teaching context? What kind of assistance would you be happy to receive and from whom for these factors to be established?

Thank you. We have arrived at the end of our conversation. Is there anything else that we did not discuss during the interview, but you would consider it important to talk about?

Thank you very much for participating in this interview.

Appendix B

Fig. B1. A thematic map of the overarching themes, themes, and sub-themes

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