

Researching differentiated Instruction Practices in Poetic Texts in the 1st Grade of Secondary School.

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Abstract

This paper researches the effectiveness of the application of the differentiated instruction method in a mixed-ability classroom of three learning levels (very good learners, average learners and learners with learning disabilities) of the 1st grade of an experimental secondary school of Athens with regard to the comprehension and interpretation of poetic texts. Namely, it researches the extent to which the learners of each level separately, but also the whole classroom were helped. For this purpose, after two differentiated instructions were designed and performed in the form of action research, checklists of the lessons and questionnaires given after the end of the two differentiated instructions to 22 learners of A1 class in April/May 2014 were utilised and analysed. The data analysis highlighted the positive effect of the instruction which is differentiated with regard to the instructional goals on the comprehension and interpretation of the poetic texts in all three learning levels, as well as in the whole classroom, without any group of learners being inferior to its original level.

Keywords: differentiation, poems, 1st grade of secondary school.

JEL Classification: Z11

Introduction

In modern education, within the framework of its effectiveness, the demand for social equality in the differentiated mixed-ability classrooms is made more and more intensely. This demand can be effectively dealt with only through an epistemological approach based on constructivism, as well as on the Learning Theory-Paradigm (Koutselini, 2008), which respects dissimilarity and fulfils the needs of all learners.

In the literature review, the concept of differentiation is understood by some as a philosophy, as a way of thinking about instruction and learning (Tomlinson, 2010; Gregory & Chapman, 2002), and by others as a process, as an instructional approach (Koutselini-Ioannidou, 2006; Bearne, 1996), while, for others, the truth lies somewhere in the middle (Benjamin, 2006; Heacox, 2002).

The current curricula focus the academics' attention on a non-differentiated group of learners that perfunctorily participate in

routine procedures and are considered to know the same things just because they are in the same classroom (Koutselini-Ioannidou, 2001). At this point, the academic's role, who must differentiate the existing curriculum through his/her instruction, is pointed out.

Based on the above, the differentiation can be considered the instructional approach during which the academics amend the curriculum, the instructional methods, the sources, the learning activities and the final result, with the aim of fulfilling the differentiated needs of each learner separately, so that the learning opportunities can be maximised for every learner in the classroom (Bearne, 1996). This involves variety both in the means used by learners and in the way the learners interact.

The results of the researches that select the differentiation of instruction as an effective method in order to deal with the difficulties in classrooms with learners with different ability levels or from different socioeconomic groups are remarkable. More specifically, in his research in the educational district of Rockwood (Missouri), McAdamis (2001) mentioned that the weak learners presented significant academic progress and high test results after differentiated instruction. Moreover, in a Greek research (Valianti, Koutselini-Ioannidou, Kyriakidis, 2010), it was observed that the differentiation of instruction can constitute the answer to the problem of increasing dissimilarity in modern school classrooms and, by extension, to failure at school.

Therefore, this research was carried out in the framework of researching the effectiveness of differentiated instruction. The reasons why the subject was chosen were the following: a) while, abroad, differentiated instruction is a widespread educational method in the educational reality, in Greek education, with the exception of Cyprus, there is a significant gap both in research and in the everyday practice in school classrooms, without exception, b) because, while we were in a classroom of an Experimental School where learners did not differentiate greatly with regard to their socioeconomic origin nor to their learning level (they were chosen to attend the school by written examination), we observed big differences both in their cognitive level and in their learning profile. This differentiation was expressed through the difficulty in comprehending and interpreting literary texts, although the class professor used alternative ways of instruction, such as ICT, supervisory material. Finally, another reason for choosing the subject was c) the exploration of the possibility to apply this method.

Methodology

The purpose of this research effort was to explore the following: 1. To what extent does instruction with the use of the differentiation method help the learners of a mixed-ability classroom (children with learning disabilities, talented children, average learners etc.) understand and interpret poetic texts? 2. How do learners as a whole view the application of differentiated instruction?

Participants

The research sample consisted of twenty two learners (n=22) of A1 class of an experimental school of Athens, nine (9) boys and thirteen (13) girls. All learners were present in both instructional

interventions. Some of them had been diagnosed with learning disabilities. More specifically, one learner had been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. Another one had been diagnosed by a public hospital with high IQ, but the professor introduced him to us as functionally illiterate, which we discovered too after constant observation of his participation in class and the study of his written homework. Another learner had recently lost his mother and, therefore, the selection of our material was appropriately oriented. A female learner had attention deficit (ADHD). Quite a few learners (2 boys and 5 girls) had very high cognitive level and excellently responded to the learning requirements. The rest (12 learners) could be classified as average-performance learners.

Tools

The research tools that were utilised for the data collection were two improvised questionnaires for the evaluation of the respective differentiated instructions, which were given to the learners after the end of the instructions. Both questionnaires were constructed as follows: they included seven questions in total, of which three were based on the Likert five-point scale, two were third-degree questions and two were open-ended questions. More specifically, the first question concerned the extent to which the learners understood the poem with the use of the worksheet. The second one concerned their opinion about the activities through closed-ended and open-ended questions. The third one had two parts. The first part concerned the difficulty level of the instruction. The second part concerned the reference to a specific point that was the most difficult for them. The fourth question concerned their participation and interest in the lesson. The fifth one concern the extent to which the academic provided support/help in the comprehension of the poem. And the sixth one concerned the commenting on whether the instruction was any different and what was different about it.

The questionnaires were processed as follows: as far as the first research question was concerned, both questionnaires were analysed based on the three learning levels that were observed before the performance of the differentiated instructions. As far as the second research question was concerned, a statistical analysis of both questionnaires was performed with SPSS 18 Statistics of IBM. The data collection and processing was supplemented by the differentiated instruction checklist that was utilised during the instructional interventions, by the reflective comments of the researcher-academic and by the oral comments of the classroom academic.

Design of the action research

The interventional strategy we followed included instructional actions that were designed based on the text-centred instructional model with small variations in the strategies used. The instructional interventions were performed on 30/4/2014 (4th hour) and on 14/5/2014 (4th hour).

The poems taught in the first intervention were: «Τζιτζίκια σήσανε χορό», by G. Ritsos, and «Κάτω στις μαργαρίτας τ' αλωνάκι», by O. Elytis, from the textbook of the 1st grade of secondary school, and, in the second intervention: «Ευπνάμε και ξυπνά κι η θάλασσα μαζί μας», by G. Sarantaris, from the textbook of the 2nd grade of secondary school, due to the thematic and temporal proximity to the summer. More

specifically, from the differentiation characteristics, the following were utilised: a) Goal rating: nuclear knowledge, new knowledge and post-cognitive skills, b) Activity rating: designed based on the aforementioned rated goals, so that all learners can reach their achievement, c) Process differentiation: interpretative approach through questions and answers, utilisation of the worksheet, provision of individualised help. The activities given as homework after the first instructional intervention were constructed based on the answers given by the learners in the improvised questionnaire for the diagnosis of the intelligence types according to Gardner.

Before the interventions, the instruction of the classroom academic's course was observed in the form of free personal diary, as well as discussion with the teacher about the classroom profile, where the differentiation of the classroom in three learning levels (very good, average-performance and special-need learners) and the low participation of the learners that belonged to the average-performance and special-need groups were observed. Out of the twenty two (22) learners, fifteen (15) presented low participation and difficulties in comprehending literary texts. Then, an improvised questionnaire given to the learners was utilised concerning the diagnosis of the intelligence types according to Gardner (amended to four types instead of eight), their interests-needs, as well as the way in which they want to work in the classroom (individually, in groups of two learners, in groups of three or more learners). Moreover, the class teacher was given a form for the classification of the learners in types based on her assessments and observations from her cooperation with the class until then. In both instructional interventions that had rated goals, a checklist was utilised and concerned the whole instruction and, particularly, the achievement of the differentiated instruction goals that had been set with regard to the comprehension and interpretation of the poems. The checklists were filled in by two out of the three researchers-academics that played the role of the critic friend. After the first instruction, an evaluation questionnaire was given to the learners and a short discussion was made with the classroom professor.

The second instruction was designed taking account of the data that resulted both from processing the questionnaires and from the observation and reflection by the academics-researchers. The changes made were the following: a) one poem was taught instead of two, and b) more self-acting was given to the learners as follows: the worksheet included open-ended questions instead of the closed-ended questions of the first instructional intervention, the interpretative approach was used to a greater extent and more discussion was made before the whole class, while the individualised help was limited. After the second intervention, the same evaluation questionnaire that had been given in the first intervention was given again. The rated goals and the worksheet are presented below:

The rated instructional goals and the worksheets utilised in the two instructional interventions were the following:

Rated goals of the 1st instructional intervention

- 1 To identify the era to which the poems refer and the age groups to which the two poems refer (activities a, b, c of the worksheet).
- 2 To understand and correlate the connection of literature-nature-society and, more specifically, of nature and childhood (activities d, e, f, g of the worksheet).

3 To understand and identify the ways of expression with which the poets portray the relationship between the human and the natural and manmade environment (activity h of the worksheet). The worksheet of the 1st instructional intervention is presented below.

Worksheet of the 1st instructional intervention

- a) To which era do the two poems refer?
.....
- b) Find words in the poem that are related to the particular era.
.....
- c) Which age groups are mentioned in the two poems?
.....
- d) Circle the expressions that fit the poem's content more and find the respective verses in the text:
The children-teenagers have worries
The old world seems carefree
The children-teenagers seem happy
The old world felt bitterness
- e) In the second verse of the second poem, it seems that:
The teenagers are troubled
The teenagers are hot due to the summer heat
The teenagers feel the first emotions of love
The teenagers see the future with optimism
- f) Why are the feelings of the two age groups different? Answer in approximately 20-30 words.
.....
- g) With which means of expression (metaphor, personification, simile, images) are feelings portrayed? Find the respective verses.
Metaphor:
Simile:
Personification:
Images:
- h) Which unit of your book do you believe that the poem fits better based on its content?
A) Human and nature
B) Problems of modern life
C) Travel texts
D) The love for our fellow humans

Homework

Choose freely one of the following:
Both poems are rich in images.

- 1 Choose and draw the one you liked more. (kinesthetic type)
- 2 Write one paragraph about how you start experiencing/feeling the changes of adolescence (emotional mood, interests, relationship with adults and peers). (emotional type)
- 3 After reading the following poem by Seferis, try to find words/expressions that refer to the poems of Ritsos and Elytis, and quote them on the side. (logical-mathematical type)

{...}I recognised
the voice of children at dawn
descending on green nests
happy like bees and like
the butterflies with their many
colours.{...}

(Abstract from the poem *Ysterografo*, *Imerologio Katastromatos II*)

- 4 After reading the following poem by Seferis, try to replace the underlined words with your own, creating a new poem. (linguistic type)

*I recognised
the voice of children at dawn
descending on green nests
happy like bees and like
the butterflies with their many colours.*

(Abstract from the poem *Ysterografo*, *Imerologio Katastromatos II*)

Rated goals of the 2nd instructional intervention

- 1 For the learners to identify the scenery and, in general, the time and space of the poem (activities a, b of the worksheet).
- 2 To understand the feeling of joy and optimism that the poem projects and to correlate it with nature's positive effect (activities c, d of the worksheet).
- 3 To understand the mental and emotional rebirth that nature offers in comparison to the emptiness that the city and the material culture offer (activities e, f, g, h of the worksheet).

Worksheet of the 2nd instructional intervention

- a) To which time does the poem refer? Find words in the poem that justify your answer.
.....
- b) The poet lays a scenery. Find words in the poem that refer to this scenery.
.....
- c) What emotional atmosphere is expressed by the following expressions of the poem?
we move forward with new perception:
.....
in our heart we (temporarily) emptied the city:
.....
- d) "The day has meanders as the sea has waves". Circle the expression that you believe corresponds to the meaning of the verse.
Life is full of difficulties
Life is not stagnant like the sea, but it is adventurous
Life is so beautiful, like an artwork
- e) "In our heart we emptied the city". What does this verse imply?
The city is empty
The city fulfils our soul
The city's routine and dullness tired our soul
- f) Who is talking in the poem? How does the poetic subject appear in the poem?
.....
- g) Which purpose is he talking about? What does he pursue/want?
to get out of the city's dullness and routine
to indicate how attractive life in nature is
to persuade us that we must give meaning to our life every day
- h) Which of the following images do you think fits the poem's meaning better?



Results

The instructional differentiation was based on the rating of three goals, in order to cover the three learning levels (Table 1) that were observed.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of the 22 children of the research with regard to the learning levels and the gender

GENDER		LEARNING LEVELS			Total
		Very good	Average performance	Special needs	
Girls	n	5	7	1	13
Boys	n	2	5	2	9
Total	n	7	12	3	22

The results of the **first** instructional intervention with regard to the first research question were the following: the **special-need** learners (n=3) did not seem to have any difficulties in the comprehension and the activities, and their participation was satisfactory.

The **average-performance** learners (n= 12) seemed to fully comprehend the poem and not to have any difficulty in the rated difficulty activities based on the differentiated/rated goals that had been set. Their participation was average to high.

The **very-good-performance** learners (n=7) responded equally well to the comprehension of the text. They found the activities normal-doable without being boring. The point where they seemed to have difficulties concerned the poem composition activity that also constituted the rated instructional goal of greater difficulty that had been set.

The results of the **second** redesigned instructional intervention for the first research question were the following: the **special-need** learners (n=3) (out of the three, only two filled the questionnaire in) participated more in comparison to the instructions of the classroom teacher. As far as the first differentiated instruction is concerned, the participation remained the same, with the exception of the learner with the Asperger syndrome.

The **average-performance** learners (n= 12) responded equally well as in the first differentiated instruction and showed great improvement in comparison to the instructions of the classroom teacher.

The **very-good-performance** learners (n=7) participated equally well in both differentiated instructions with no change.

The results for the second research question were the following: as far as the questions constructed based on the Likert scale are concerned, there was no difference between the first and the second time (Table 2).

As far as the open-ended questions are concerned, a difference was observed between the first and the second provision. In the question concerning what the most difficult for them was in today's instruction, there seemed to be a statistically significant difference between the first and the second evaluation ($p=0.020$) (Table 3b), as they stated that the second time was less difficult for them. More specifically, the learners that found the comprehension difficult (27.3%) in the first instruction found the second one less difficult (23.8%) (Table 2).

Namely, the 66.7% of the learners that had trouble comprehending in the first evaluation fell to 33.3% in the second one (Table 3b). Moreover, 80% answered that nothing was difficult in the second instruction compared to just 20% that had responded that they had no difficulties in the first instruction (Table 3b). As far as the difficulty in the poem composition in the first intervention is concerned, there is no such difficulty in the second one, because, during the redesign of the second instruction, no similar activity was requested.

In the second open-ended question concerning whether there was something different in today's instruction and what that was, a statistically significant difference is observed between the first and the second provision ($p= 0.141$), since 25% of the learners considered the creation of verses different, while, in the second evaluation, the percentage reached 75% of the learners questioned (Table 3c). Moreover, 71.4% in the second evaluation compared to 14.3% in the first evaluation found nothing different (Table 3c). And those that considered the instructions nice the first time (50%) continued having the same opinion the second time (50%) (Table 3c).

In conclusion, the statistical analysis showed that the learners found the first instruction a little more difficult ($p=0.096$) (Table 3a) than the second one, as the problem was limited to the comprehension.

Table 2: Frequency distributions of the answers of the 22 learners in the 1st and 2nd evaluation of the instructional interventions

		1 st evaluation		2 nd evaluation	
		n	%	N	%
In the way the poems were taught (through the worksheet), I understood their content	Not at all	1	4.5	0	0.0
	A little	0	0.0	2	9.5
	Quite	5	22.7	2	9.5
	Much	6	27.3	6	28.6
	Very much	10	45.5	11	52.4
You found the activities of the worksheet	Very easy /Boring	4	21.1	4	20.0
	Normal /Doable	15	78.9	16	80.0
	Difficult /Demanding	0	0.0	0	0.0
Did you find today's instruction difficult?	Not at all	12	54.5	15	71.4
	A little	9	40.9	6	28.6
	Quite	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Very	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Extremely	1	4.5	0	0.0
What did you find most difficult in today's instruction?	Poem composition	7	31.8	0	0.0
	Comprehension	6	27.3	5	23.8
	Nothing	7	31.8	14	66.7
	No answer	1	4.5	2	9.5
	Everything was difficult	1	4.5	0	0.0
My participation and interest during the lesson in the subject of the lesson was	Low	3	13.6	3	14.3
	Moderate	8	36.4	11	52.4
	High	11	50.0	7	33.3
The academic provided support-help in the comprehension of the poems' content	Not at all	2	9.1	1	4.8
	A little	0	0.0	3	14.3
	Quite a bit	5	22.7	3	14.3
	Much	8	36.4	9	42.9
	Very much	7	31.8	5	23.8
Was there anything different in today's instruction that you liked? If so, what was that?	Nice	4	18.2	4	19.0
	Verse creation	4	18.2	0	0.0
	Nothing different	8	36.4	10	47.6
	Instructional material	4	18.2	5	23.8
	Use of the senses /Many teachers	1	4.5	0	0.0
	N/A	1	4.5	2	9.5

Table 3a: Differences between the 1st and 2nd evaluation of the 22 children for the two instructional interventions

	Evaluation	Average	S.D.	p
In the way the poems were taught	1 st	4.1	1.1	0.558

(through the worksheet), I understood their content (1 - 5)	2 nd	4.2	1.0	
I found the activities of the worksheet difficult/demanding (1 - 3)	1st	1.8	0.4	0.564
	2 nd	1.8	0.4	
Did you find today's instruction difficult? (1 - 5)	1st	1.6	0.9	0.096
	2 nd	1.3	0.5	
My participation and interest during the lesson in the subject of the lesson was high (1 - 3)	1st	2.4	0.7	0.317
	2 nd	2.2	0.7	
The academic provided support-help in the comprehension of the poems' content (1 - 3)	1st	3.8	1.2	0.799
	2 nd	3.7	1.2	

The Wilcoxon test was used for the difference of the averages between two correlated samples (Table 3a).

Table 3b: Differences between the 1st and 2nd evaluation of the 22 children for the two instructional interventions. (p=0.020)

What did you find most difficult in today's instruction?			2 nd evaluation		
			Comprehension	Nothing	Total
1 st eval ua ti on	Poem composition	n	0	7	7
		%	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	Comprehension	n	4	2	6
		%	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
	Nothing	n	1	4	5
		%	20.0%	80.0%	100.0%
	Total	n	5	13	18
		%	27.8%	72.2%	100.0%

Table 3c: Differences between the 1st and 2nd evaluation of the 22 children for the two instructional interventions. (p=0.141)

Was there anything different in today's instruction that you liked? If so, what was that?			2 nd evaluation				
			Nice	Nothing different	Instructional material	Total	
1 st eval ua ti on	Nice	n	1	1	0	2	
		%	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	Verse creation	n	1	3	0	4	
		%	25.0%	75.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	Nothing different	N	1	5	1	7	
		%	14.3%	71.4%	14.3%	100.0%	
	Instructional material	N	0	1	3	4	
		%	0.0%	25.0%	75.0%	100.0%	
	Total		N	3	10	4	17

		%	17.6%	58.8%	23.5%	100.0%
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The χ^2 test was used for testing the correlation between the two categorical variables (Tables 3b and 3c).

Discussion

Taking account of the results that arose from the (quantitative and qualitative) data processing, as well as the limitations due to the small and targeted sample of learners and the limited temporal application of the action research, we draw the conclusion that there are indications that the application of an instruction that is differentiated with regard to the instructional goals had a positive effect on the learners of all three learning levels. The very good learners responded as well as in a non-differentiated instruction without finding it very easy or boring, the average learners improved and became very good, while the majority of the learners with learning disabilities improved noticeably. Therefore, the results of the researches by McAdamis (2001) and Valianti, Koutselini-Ioannidou & Kyriakidis (2010) (see Introduction) are confirmed, both from the aspect of the positive elements of the method and from the aspect of the weaknesses related to the preparation time and the cooperative work, which mitigate quite a bit, however, due to the improvement of the instructional work through differentiation.

Further exploration is proposed in a larger sample of learners of general, vocational and private schools of urban and semi-urban areas, and for a longer period, with the approach of not only poetic but also prose literary texts, so that these results can be generalized in the rest learner population.

Conclusions

As proven by our research, differentiated instruction is a method addressed to all learners and the requirements of all learners of a mixed-ability classroom, without "sidelining" or enforcing one category against another, as it treats the learner as a biography, namely as a unique individual case, and it examines all the factors that can influence learning, either related to the school or not (Koutselini-Ioannidou, 2001), so that the learner can develop as much as possible and school failure can be prevented. Finally, the design of the instructional interventions proves not only the effectiveness but also the possibility to apply differentiated instruction as a method.

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