

Bridging the Gap between Differentiated Instruction and Second Language Acquisition among University Students

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Abstract. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has drawn considerable attention from researchers and educators seeking effective strategies to enhance language learning. One such approach that has gained traction is differentiated instruction which may be effective in enhancing students' second language acquisition process. To address this, a qualitative case study was conducted to examine the impact of differentiated instruction on students' second language (L2) acquisition. The study involved 15 participants who had undergone an English-intensive program at the university level. Data were collected through online open-ended questionnaires designed to capture cognitive, affective, and conative impacts. The findings reveal that differentiated instruction aligned with students' interests and abilities significantly enhances students' understanding, motivation, and active learning behaviors in their second language acquisition process. However, the study also identified challenges, including difficulties with independent acquisition and intrinsic motivation barriers. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of this research and develop strategies to address the identified challenges, ensuring a broader impact on student second language acquisition.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Second Language Acquisition, Teaching Strategies, Individual Differences

Introduction

Mastering a second language (L2) is increasingly essential in our interconnected world. Second Language Acquisition encompasses both the study of how individuals and groups learn a language after acquiring their first language in childhood and the actual process of learning that language (Saville-Troike, 2012). Additionally, O'Grady (2008) noted that second language acquisition research examines how people achieve proficiency in a language that is not their native tongue. Stefánsson (2013) described SLA as the study of how learners acquire a

second language (L2) in addition to their first language (L1). Despite the term "Second Language Acquisition", it pertains to the process of learning any additional language beyond the first, whether it is a second, third, or fourth language. Consequently, any language learned after the first is referred to as a second language or target language.

According to Brown (2001), the theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) encompasses an understanding of language, learning, and teaching within classroom contexts. It addresses how individuals, whether children or adults, learn a second or foreign language, in both instructed and natural environments. For those who have not acquired a language from birth through social interaction, conscious language learning is necessary, focusing on enhancing language knowledge, skills, and intercultural communication abilities in real-life contexts. Consequently, based on SLA theories, teachers should implement student-centered teaching approaches to impart intercultural communication knowledge, develop students' intercultural communication skills, create conducive language acquisition environments, consider students' emotional factors, and improve the overall quality and effectiveness of college English instruction (Changyu, 2009).

Learning a new language, however, is a multifaceted and complex journey, with the pace and ease of acquisition varying significantly among individuals. Some learners succeed in acquiring another language quickly and with minimal assistance, while others struggle to achieve proficiency. This variability is influenced by factors such as previous language experience, cognitive skills, motivation, and preferred learning styles (Spada & Lightbrown, 2022). Individual differences affect language learning outcomes, as learners with varying abilities adopt different approaches, leading to diverse results. Additionally, language classrooms often encompass a wide range of proficiency levels, posing a challenge for educators to design lessons that meet each student's needs effectively (Ojong, 2023). The importance of learner characteristics cannot be overstated. Therefore, teachers must provide effective strategies and methodologies to enhance the second language acquisition process.

One such approach that has gained traction is Differentiated Instruction which has taken a spotlight in the present Indonesian educational framework. This approach involves catering to student's diverse needs based on their interests, readiness, and learning profiles through the adaptation of curricular elements in the areas of content, process, product, and environment (Ismail, 2019; Kotob & Arnouss, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). The implementation of differentiated instruction has emerged as a practical approach for meeting the varied learning needs of students within the same classroom. Differentiated instruction proponents believe that instruction is best conducted by adapting the learning instruction to the student's needs to maximize all students' abilities and potential (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

Integrating differentiated instruction into language learning yields notable benefits. Various studies, including those by Idamayanti et al. (2022) and Naka (2017), suggest that differentiated instruction positively influences students' learning outcomes. By aligning with the teacher's lesson plan, it enhances students' motivation and academic achievements. Teachers, on the other hand, can use differentiated learning to facilitate meaningful learning experiences within classrooms characterized by diverse student traits, learning styles, and prior knowledge (Mirawati et al., 2022; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Considering the

many proven benefits of differentiated instruction, it is essential to implement this approach to improve the quality of students' second language acquisition.

Providing a fair learning environment requires in-class adaptations that will enable each individual to maximize their learning (Gregory & Chapman, 2013). Imbeau & Tomlinson (2010) suggests that adapting differentiated instruction involves modifying four key elements: what students learn (content), how to learn (process), how to demonstrate what has been known (product), and classroom tone or organization (learning environment). Thus, incorporating differentiated instruction into second language acquisition involves a thoughtful adaptation of teaching strategies to meet the unique needs of each language learner, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and effective learning experience.

There have been several previous studies in the area of differentiated instruction for second language acquisition contexts such as by Reis et al. (2011) who found that students in differentiated classrooms exhibited notably greater progress in language acquisition compared to those in traditional classrooms. Furthermore, Dağyar & Demirel (2015) demonstrated that students' insights of differentiated instruction significantly influence their engagement, motivation, and language learning outcomes in second-language classrooms. Similarly, Ojong (2023) highlighted that students value the opportunity to learn at their own pace, receive personalized feedback, and engage in activities tailored to their interests and learning styles. Demirel & Dağyar (2016) conducted a meta-analysis revealing that differentiated teaching substantially improved second language learners' overall academic performance. Additionally, Bidari (2021) observed that while teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward differentiated instruction, they encounter challenges in effectively implementing it, such as resource constraints and inadequate training.

Among these previous studies, one of the English tutors has implemented differentiated instruction practices in the English intensive program. The English tutor employed modification where the students were differentiated based on their abilities and interests, including the learning sources, media, student grouping, and assessment adaptations. However, there is no empirical study on the impact of differentiated instruction on students' second language (L2) acquisition. This gap in research underscores the need to understand how differentiated instruction impacts the learning experiences, engagement, and outcomes of students in second language learning environments.

Consequently, the present study would like to fill the gap which aims to investigate students' views and experiences with this form of differentiated instruction settings in acquiring English as a second language (L2). The objectives of this study are addressed through the following research question: What are the impacts of differentiated instruction on second language acquisition among university students in cognitive, affective, and conative aspects? This research seeks to provide valuable insights for educators aiming to optimize their instructional strategies and effectively support diverse learners.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study approach to explore the impact of differentiated instruction on students' second language (L2) acquisition. This method was chosen to gain an in-depth

understanding of the participants' experiences and viewpoints within a specific context. The study involved 15 first-year EFL students who had participated in an English-intensive program and had experience in a differentiated instruction setting at the university level. Each participant provided informed consent forms, which ensured the confidentiality of their personal information through the use of pseudonyms, and their participation in the study was entirely voluntary.

Data collection was conducted using an online open-ended questionnaire. These questions were carefully designed and divided into three sections to capture the cognitive, affective, and conative insights of the students, as mentioned by Amir (2015). This structure allows for a comprehensive understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors related to differentiated instruction settings in acquiring English as a second language (L2). Researchers visited participants in the class and distributed the online questionnaires. Before filling out the questionnaire, necessary explanations were provided to the students.

The data analysis process was conducted in several stages to ensure thorough and accurate interpretation. Initially, the responses from the open-ended questionnaires were translated into English. Following this, key terms and themes were identified within the responses. These critical elements were then classified according to the concepts that emerged, providing a structured framework for analysis. The classified data were meticulously explained and analyzed to uncover patterns and insights. Finally, the findings were carefully examined and presented coherently, emphasizing key themes supported by illustrative quotes or excerpts from the open-ended questionnaire.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The data for this study were obtained from students' insights through online open-ended questionnaires regarding the impact of differentiated instruction on students' second language (L2) acquisition designed based on their interests or abilities. The student responses measured in this study encompassed three main variables: cognitive, affective, and conative, as mentioned by Amir (2015). The cognitive responses assessed the students' understanding and intellectual engagement with the differentiated instruction on students' second language acquisition. The affective responses evaluated their emotional reactions, levels of interest, and motivation. Finally, the conative responses examined their behavioral intentions and actions related to the use of differentiated instruction on students' second language (L2) acquisition.

Cognitive variable insights

The cognitive variables that are closely related to knowledge, skills, and information are explored in this part. The finding indicates that students believe that the use of differentiated instruction based on their interests or abilities can help them enhance their second language (L2) acquisition, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

"Yes, it is because differentiated instructions help me to acquire English as a second language by providing a learning space that matches with my interests and abilities making the process more interesting and relevant to me". (MI-03)

The excerpt underscores that the student attributes success in acquiring English as a second language (L2) to the implementation of differentiated instruction. This teaching approach tailors the learning environment and materials to align with the learner's personal interests and abilities. By doing this, it enhances the engagement and relevance of the learning material. As a result, the learner finds the process more stimulating and meaningful, which facilitates better understanding and retention of the new language. This finding highlights the importance of personalized learning experiences in supporting individual learners' needs and optimizing their language acquisition process. Another student also gave similar responses, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

"Yes, because if the process of acquiring a second language does not suit my abilities/interests, it will be difficult for me to acquire the language". (DNS-01)

The student's response emphasizes the critical role of personalized and interest-based instruction in second language acquisition (SLA). According to the student, if the process of learning a second language does not align with their abilities or interests, it becomes challenging for them to acquire the language effectively. In other words, mismatched instructional methods can create obstacles to learning and hinder progress. This finding underscores the broader principle that effective SLA involves adapting teaching approaches to fit the learner's unique profile, optimizing their potential for success.

On the clarity of learning instructions and information indicators, the analysis of students' insights on the impact of differentiated instruction based on their interests or abilities shows that students are easy and comfortable to acquire a second language (L2), as reflected in the following excerpt.

"Yes, it is very easy and comfortable to do. I think so because there is no coercion in learning and learning comfortably can make someone enjoy acquiring a second language". (IPM-02)

The student's response underscores the positive impact of differentiated instruction on their ability to acquire a second language (L2). The student attributes this ease and comfort to the absence of coercion in the learning environment, which allows them to enjoy the process of acquiring a second language. In addition to this finding, learning in such a comfortable environment, without pressure, enables students to enjoy the acquisition process, thereby enhancing their overall language proficiency. These findings highlight that when instructions are clear and aligned with individual interests or abilities, students experience a straightforward and stress-free learning process. In contrast, the excerpt AN-02 from the student presents a different perspective.

"It is not easy because carrying out many activities or projects during differentiation requires us to determine in advance what we will do in the activity". (DN-02)

The excerpt reflects a perspective that student finds differentiated instruction challenging because it involves a lot of planning and deciding what to do beforehand. Unlike the previous student who found differentiated instruction easy and enjoyable, this student feels that the need to plan ahead makes learning more difficult. This shows that while differentiated instruction can be helpful for some, it can also be hard for others if it requires too much preparation and decision-making. This suggests that teachers need to find a balance, making sure that while

they cater to different needs, they also provide enough guidance and support to make the process of acquiring a second language (L2) easier for all students.

Affective variable insights

The affective variables that are closely related to conditions when students face something using emotions such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasm, motivation, and attitudes are explored in this part. The finding indicates that students believe that the use of differentiated instruction based on their interests or abilities can help them acquire their second language (L2) acquisition independently, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

"Yes, because I have to acquire the second language at my own pace without stress". (IR-06)

"Yes, because the process of acquiring the language that matches my interests and abilities makes me more motivated and interested in acquiring the language independently". (MI-03)

The excerpts reveal that students perceive differentiated instruction based on their interests or abilities as conducive to independent second language (L2) acquisition. The first excerpt suggests that personalized learning allows students to progress at their own pace, fostering a sense of ownership over their language learning journey. This autonomy empowers them to tailor their learning experience to suit their individual needs and preferences. Similarly, the second excerpt highlights the impacts of differentiated instruction, indicating that when learning activities align with students' interests and abilities, they are more likely to be more excited to acquire the language by themselves. Together, these findings underscore the significance of adapting instruction to cater to diverse learner profiles, not only enhancing language acquisition outcomes but also nurturing students' autonomy and intrinsic motivation in their language learning endeavors. However, some excerpts from the student offer an alternative viewpoint.

"it does not help me to acquire the second language independently because I need friends to discuss with or a lecturer to give guidance". (AM-03)

Yes, sometimes it's like that, but it's a bit difficult to acquire the language independently, but the urge to do it independently is always there". (ABD-03)

The excerpts express a different perspective, indicating that while differentiated instruction tailored to their interests or abilities may be beneficial, it may not fully enable independent language acquisition. One student highlights the need for peer discussion and interaction as essential for their learning process, suggesting that social engagement plays a crucial role alongside personalized instruction. Another acknowledges the desire to learn independently but recognizes the challenges involved without external support or guidance. These viewpoints underscore the complexity of language acquisition and suggest that while differentiated instruction may support independent learning, it may not be the sole factor in facilitating successful language acquisition without additional social interaction and support from peers or educators.

In addition to these results, students' insights analysis shows that modifying instruction based on their interests or abilities can increase student motivation in acquiring the second language (L2), as reflected in the following excerpt.

"When learning is tailored to take into account each student's unique characteristics, they will feel more engaged and motivated. Thus, personalized learning can help increase interest, self-confidence, and learning outcomes in second language acquisition". (FR-04)

The excerpt highlights the motivational benefits of differentiated instruction based on students' interests or abilities in second language (L2) acquisition. It reveals that when instruction is personalized to accommodate each student's individual characteristics, such as their interests and abilities, they feel more engaged and motivated. This increased engagement can lead to greater interest, self-confidence, and ultimately improved learning outcomes in acquiring a second language. By tailoring instruction to meet the unique needs of each student, personalized learning can effectively enhance motivation and contribute to a more successful language acquisition process. The excerpt AP-04, on the other hand, performs different insights, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

"No, because my motivation in acquiring the language depends on myself, it does not come from the learning system". (DN-04)

The excerpt presents a contrasting perspective, suggesting that the student's motivation in acquiring a language is intrinsic and not influenced by the learning system or instructional methods. According to this viewpoint, external factors such as personalized instruction based on interests or abilities may not significantly impact the student's motivation to learn a second language. Instead, the student emphasizes that their motivation stems from internal factors, implying a self-directed approach to second language (L2) acquisition.

The results of the analysis of student responses to the use of differentiated instruction based on their interests or abilities on the attractiveness indicator show that students are more interested and do not feel bored in acquiring their second language (L2) acquisition, as reflected in the following excerpt.

"Yes, if learning suits my interests (I like animation and music) I am more interested. For example, learning a second language using music is not boring and makes me quickly acquire English.". (ABS-05)

The excerpt highlights that when instruction aligns with students' interests, they are more engaged and less likely to feel bored in acquiring a second language (L2). The student emphasizes that learning tailored to their interests, such as using music and animation, enhances their interest and prevents boredom during language acquisition. By incorporating activities that resonate with their interests, such as learning through music, the student finds the process more enjoyable and effective, facilitating a quicker acquisition of English.

Conative variable insights

This section explores the conative variables, which are closely related to responses involving actual behavior, including actions and habits. The finding indicates that students believe that the use of differentiated instruction based on their interests or abilities can help them increase student activity in acquiring their second language (L2) acquisition, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

"That's right because I have to acquire the second language by always actively participating in class, such as asking questions or interacting with others". (DN-07)

The student emphasizes the importance of active participation in the learning process, such as asking questions and interacting with peers. This highlights the role of differentiated instruction in fostering a dynamic and participatory learning environment, where students take ownership of their language acquisition journey through consistent engagement and interaction. Another excerpt also highlights the role of instructors in differentiated instructions can cultivate student participation in second language (L2) acquisition process.

"Lecturers can provide material appropriate to each student's ability level, facilitate interesting learning, and provide personalized support so that I am more likely to actively participate in the learning process". (FR-06)

The student highlights the importance of instructors providing learning processes suited to individual ability levels, facilitating engaging learning experiences, and offering personalized support. These factors contribute to increased student participation and active engagement in the learning process. This finding underscores that the role of educators can encourage students to take a more active role in their language acquisition journey, leading to more effective and enjoyable learning outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the use of differentiated instruction based on students' interests or abilities significantly enhances various aspects of their second language (L2) acquisition process. These results align with previous research that highlights the benefits of personalized and interest-based learning approaches. According to Tomlinson & Imbeau (2010), differentiated instruction that considers students' individual interests and learning profiles can lead to increased engagement and improved academic outcomes, including in the second language acquisition process. Similarly, Spada & Lightbrown (2022) emphasize the significant impact of individual differences such as cognitive skills, motivation, and preferred learning styles on language learning outcomes. When instruction is adapted to meet these individual needs, students are more likely to remain engaged and motivated, facilitating a more effective language acquisition process.

The cognitive benefits observed in this study are consistent with the findings of Amir (2015), which emphasizes that the use of differentiated instruction based on interests or abilities can help them enhance their second language (L2) acquisition. Students in the current study reported that when the learning environment and materials align with students' interests and abilities, it makes the language learning process more engaging and relevant to L2 learners. It is supported by Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, that comprehensible input is crucial for language acquisition. Adjusting content (input) based on their interest or abilities ensures that learners receive appropriate input they can engage, leading to better understanding and retention during the second language acquisition process. Furthermore, the study underscores that differentiated instruction promotes a stress-free, comfortable learning environment, enhancing students' ability to acquire a second language. Pekrun et al. (2007) emphasize that when learners feel relaxed and not pressured, they find learning enjoyable, leading to deeper engagement and improved language retention. This is also consistent with Krashen's (1989) Affective Filter Hypothesis, suggesting that reducing stress facilitates more effective language acquisition by minimizing emotional barriers.

From an affective perspective, the study revealed that modifying learning instructions also positively impacts students' emotional responses to learning. The study found that the use of differentiated instruction based on their interests or abilities can help them acquire their second language (L2) acquisition independently. Pasroni (2023) and Tomlinson (2014) stated that through differentiated instruction, students will be able to hold responsibility for their learning process. These studies provide empirical evidence supporting the notion that differentiated instruction can enhance motivation and promote independent language acquisition. Moreover, the study found that aligning a second language acquisition with students' interests or abilities boosts intrinsic motivation and engagement. Furthermore, students are more interested and do not feel bored in acquiring their second language (L2) acquisition during differentiated instruction. These findings are in line with Demirel & Dağyar (2016) who state that differentiated instruction in second-language classrooms can substantially impact their engagement, motivation, and language learning outcomes. It is also reaffirmed by Chen & Chen (2017) who states that students were less likely to experience boredom and more likely to remain engaged in the language learning process during differentiated instruction settings.

In terms of conative variables, differentiated instructions promote active learning behaviors and habits. Students reported that the use of differentiated instruction based on their interests or abilities helps them increase student activity in acquiring their second language (L2) acquisition. In the context of differentiated instruction, it would allow students to acquire practical real-world skills, and they engaged more actively in acquiring language (Fook & Sidhu, 2010). This finding also aligns with previous research that underscores the role of active engagement in language learning success (Dörnyei, 2009). Furthermore, students attribute their increased activity in the language acquisition process to the role of instructors in implementing differentiated instruction. The emphasis on the instructors' role underscores the importance of teacher-student interactions and support in creating a conducive learning environment for language acquisition (Krashen, 1985).

Despite its positive impacts, implementing differentiated instruction in second language acquisition faces challenges. Some students struggle with independent work, indicating a need for clear instructions and support (Fox et al., 2017). Research by Mayo & Pica (2000) emphasizes the importance of social interaction in language learning, aligning with students' preference for discussing language concepts with peers or receiving guidance from a lecturer. Interaction provides opportunities for language practice, negotiation of meaning, and the development of communicative competence, which are essential aspects of language learning. Furthermore, this finding highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation in language learning success. Research has consistently shown that intrinsically motivated learners demonstrate higher levels of engagement, persistence, and achievement compared to extrinsically motivated learners (Dörnyei, 2009). Therefore, educators should foster a supportive and autonomy-supportive learning environment to nurture students' intrinsic motivation.

Conclusion

This research explored the impact of differentiated instruction on students' second language (L2) acquisition designed based on their interests or abilities. The

findings show that differentiated instruction can significantly enhance engagement, motivation, and active learning behaviors. Cognitively, students found that personalized learning made the process of acquiring a second language more relevant and understandable, fostering deeper intellectual engagement. Affective responses indicated increased emotional engagement, motivation, and interest in second language acquisition. Conatively, modifying instruction based on students' interests and abilities encouraged active learning behaviors, prompting students to acquire a second language in-depth and engage in critical inquiry. However, the study also identified challenges. Some students struggled with the independent nature of acquiring a second language, highlighting the need for clear instructions and adequate scaffolding. Additionally, reliance on intrinsic motivation posed barriers for some students, emphasizing the necessity of structured support.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that modifying and differentiating instruction based on student's interests and abilities can be a powerful tool in enhancing the second language acquisition process when implemented with careful consideration of individual needs and appropriate support mechanisms. Future research should further investigate the long-term impacts of this research and explore strategies to address the challenges identified, ensuring that all students can benefit from this innovative instruction approach.

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