Improving Year 8 students' learning outcomes through differentiation techniques

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Introduction

The key focus of this study is differentiating teaching methods within the same English classroom.

The researcher observes that the higher ability students dominate the classroom discussions and therefore hinder the possibility for middle and lower ability students to express themselves. In addition, the accuracy of formative assessment through classroom discussion is jeopardized by underrepresenting the lower abilities students. The lower ability students keep silent and for the teacher it becomes impossible to evaluate their learning progress.

This action research aims to switch this dynamic and helps to establish fairer and more productive relationships between the teacher and students of different levels within the same English classroom.

The teacher focuses on collaborative learning with different ramdomized groups, collaboration where one student is middle or high ability student and another one is of lower ability (peer-scaffolding) and also when peer-scaffolding is combined with the distributing glossaries to the lower ability students.

The researcher narrows her focus to differentiating teaching for lower ability students group in Year 8.

Literature review

Based on McNamara and Moreton (1997), collaboration is a very useful differentiation technique for the students of all abilities. Through talking to each other students become involved in deep thinking. It is also true that students with lower abilities often struggle with self-esteem and through working with a more knowledgeable classmate in a group and being invested in the learning success of the group, this issue of low self-esteem can be reduced. It is also easier for a teacher to accommodate the learning tasks to the Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD (Vygotsky, 1986) of a group rather than an individual student.

The researcher argues that the pairing based on random assignment is not the most effective. She believes that in a pair there should be one student of lower ability and another student has to come from middle/high ability group. Hence, Vygotsky's scaffolding (1986) is possible and there would be more practical learning use to such pairing.

The teacher also notices that although peer collaboration can significantly improve the quality of learning and understanding among the students, it is very important to take into consideration the difficulty of the tasks. If the task is outside the ZPD of one or both students, it brings frustration to the students instead of achieving educational goals (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011; Vygotsky, 1986; Willis, 2006). Hence, in order to conduct differentiated teaching through class collaboration, the teacher needs to take into consideration the ZPD of the students involved

Methodology and methods

The researcher uses action research methodology of McNiff (2004).

1. Review of the current practice.

2. Identifying areas for improvement.

3. Implement the techniques

4. Track the progress and analyse

5. Adjust the plan depending on the reflection results. Analyse what went wrong and adjust the techniques.

6. Analyse the modified version.

7. Continue practice until the result is satisfactory

Data, analysis and discussion

Research cycle 1
Peer scaffolding based on random pairing
The teacher realizes that random pairing has its limitations and plans to pair the lower ability students with middle or high ability students to implement peer scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1986).

Research cycle 2
Peer scaffolding based on pairing HA/MA student and LA student
Group pairing that combines students of different abilities proves to be a more effective model than random pairing. However, differentiating the teaching approach through group collaboration has its limitations when the LA students lack the necessary basics in English. Limited operational vocabulary and low mastery of key literary concepts significantly hinders the efficiency of group collaboration approach. It is suggested to combine group collaboration with providing glossaries to LA students.

Research cycle 3
Peer scaffolding based on pairing HA/MA student and LA student. In addition, LA student uses a glossary.
The researcher observes that combining differentiation techniques has positive effects on LA students' learning improvement. They also appear more engaged and more willing to cooperate if a HA peer provides assistance to them, rather than an adult teacher. The researcher plans to explore more differentiation techniques and how they can be combined together to enhance the efficiency of learning

Conclusion

1 Group collaboration that pairs a student with LA and MA or HA student in combination with the relevant glossaries provides the best learning outcomes, in comparison with random pairing or LA+HA students' pairing without glossaries.

2 Blackburn (2018) and Marzano (2001) highlight the importance of effort among the students in order to develop a growth mindset among the students. The researcher does not underestimate the role of effort in success in improving learning. If a student does not put enough effort, the evaluation of the efficiency of differentiation methods would not be accurate.

3 It is challenging to measure the success of the differentiating techniques since some students have a very shy disposition and are quite reluctant to work collaboratively.

References

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Three cycles of research data

	Correct answers %	Number of students
Cycle 1	100%	0
	66,7%	1
	33,3%	2
	0%	3
Cycle 2	100%	2
	50%	3
	25%	1
	0%	0
Cycle 3	100%	2
	75%	3
	25%	1
	0%	4

Cycle 1 - Peer scaffolding, LA students paired with a student randomly

Cycle 2 - Peer scaffolding, LA students paired with HA or MA student

Cycle 3 - Peer scaffolding, LA student paired with HA or MA student, LA students are provided with glossaries

Glossary

King Arthur
By Deborah Tempest
Glossary

Archbishop	the highest-ranking bishop who is in charge of other bishops in the church
Knight	soldier in the past who had a high social rank and who fought while riding a horse and usually wearing armour
Glittering	shining with a sparkling light
Effortlessly	achieve with ease
Westminster	place in Greater London, on the River Thames

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