High School Students’ Perceptions Towards EFL Teachers’ Differentiated Instructional Practices at Higher 23 Secondary School, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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Abstract: Teachers do have a common responsibility and/or goal of meeting the diverse learning needs of all students with different readiness levels (current knowledge, skills, or performance) that likely affects their learning. This can be achieved through a differentiated instructional approach due to its potential benefits in promoting learning for all. However, the students' perceptions towards their teachers' efforts in differentiated instructional practices remained unknown in Ethiopia, especially at high school levels as the very few local studies focused on the teachers’ perspective, missing students’ voices that may likely affect learning. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to assess and describe students’ perceptions towards the EFL teachers’ efforts in facilitating learning for all making use of differentiated instructions. The study adopted a descriptive research design. To achieve this purpose, 120 grade 12 students were randomly selected to fill a five-point liker scale questionnaire designed to elicit data about their EFL teachers’ instructional practices in maximizing learning for all through DI. 114 of them with 95% response rate fully completed and returned the questionnaires. The data was then entered into the SPSS software version 24 and analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics (mean values emphasized). The study found that the great majority of the students reported their EFL teachers are predominantly following the one-size-fits-all mode of teaching that no longer sufficiently meet the diverse needs of students in the contemporary classrooms’ situations. Thus, it was concluded that, overall, the high school students had unfavorable perceptions towards the EFL teachers efforts in differentiate instructions in promoting learning for all students. Accordingly, it was suggested that EFL teachers should get awareness training to integrate differentiated instructions into the regular EFL classes so that they will be able to promote learning for all using differentiated instructional strategies.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Differentiating Instructions, One-Size-Fits-All Approach, Students Perceptions

1. Introduction

In the contemporary classrooms, not different in EFL classes, diversity among students is a norm, not an exception. This is because our students come to class with several student-related characteristics, including but not limited to, different readiness levels, different learning needs, learning profiles, different areas of strengths and weaknesses, and pace of learning, among several others. Despite the many student-related characteristics that likely pause challenges on teachers’ teaching and/or students’ learning, all are expected to achieve and/or exceed stated learning objectives.

Under this classroom reality, using the one-size-fits-all mode of teaching, teaching to the middle level [1] fails to challenge appropriately the majority of the low achievers and some high achievers [2, 3] who may feel frustrated and under challenged respectively. Similarly, [3] asserts that “a classroom where one (same) lesson is designed for all level’s learners, limits are placed on students’ achievements. Students’ who are advanced academically are left behind because they are under challenged, and students who may be struggling are left frustrated and confused” [3] and following this mode of teaching no longer support learning in a meta-modern mixed-ability classroom [4] consisting of...
students with different grammatical and/or vocabulary knowledge, reading and listening skills, listening skills and writing skills.

In other words, teaching to the middle level, using the one-size-fits-all, fails to promote learning for the diverse groups of students who come to class with a wide range of learner related characteristics, including but not limited to, readiness levels, learning profiles, diverse learning needs, areas of strengths and weakness as well as the pace of learning. Thus, following this instructional approach hasn’t been effective in promoting learning for all students as far as our reading is concerned.

In response to the challenge of meeting the diverse learning needs of students and alleviating the pitfalls of the one-size-fits-all mode of teaching, scholars suggested differentiated instruction as a flexible and/or innovative way that responds to learner variances [5], including but not limited to different learning needs, readiness levels, interests, learning profiles [6, 7] and areas of strengths and weaknesses. Differentiating instruction helps to meet the instructional needs of students [8, 9] and promote learning for all in achieving and/or exceeding stated learning objectives as teachers differentiating instructions readily meet students’ diverse learning needs [5] to facilitate learning for the diverse groups of students in the contemporary class rooms situations.

The practices of differentiating instructions, engaging, supporting, and challenging all students adequately, requires teachers to proactively modify key curricular elements (contents, process, and products, the learning environment), teaching methods or strategies, resources, learning activities with the primary purpose of maximizing the learning opportunity of students with diverse readiness levels [10]. In other words, teachers differentiate instructions by contents of teaching, the process or learning activities/tasks or instructional strategies in lesson delivery, the products or the means by which teachers demonstrate their learning, and the learning environment [5] on the basis of their student readiness levels, learning profiles, interests, learning needs, areas of strengths and weaknesses or other student-related characteristics.

The differentiated instructional approach is increasingly viewed as the panacea most teachers, including those teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and second language (ESL), are looking for [6] maybe because it helps to maximize learning for all by providing them different learning opportunities. Similarly, using this instructional approach provides a mode for providing students with challenging learning experiences and at the same time addressing the needs of individual students to increase English language achievement [11]. Besides, [12] also states that differentiated instructional strategies are applicable in the primary, secondary, and colleges levels in teaching languages.

Despite its potential benefits in promoting learning for all students, very few studies were conducted in the Ethiopian context [13-15]. These studies were conducted on teachers’ instructional practices from teachers’ perspectives and none of them included how students perceive their teachers’ instructional practices in promoting learning for all by diversifying their instructional practices. Thus, the current study assessed and described the high school students’ perceptions towards their English teachers’ efforts in promoting learning for all students, differentiated instructions in the EFL class. In line with this purpose, the study was intended to answer this research question: how do grade 12 students perceive EFL teachers’ differentiated instructional practices to promote learning for all?

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The purpose of this study was to assess students’ perceptions towards EFL teachers’ differentiated instructional practices in promoting learning for all. Accordingly, this study adopted a descriptive study design. This design is used to specify or describe a phenomenon without conducting an experiment [16] or intervention. In descriptive survey research, the researcher takes a sample and uses the appropriate tool to collect data [17] to describe human psychological notions like views, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of the respondents as reflected in the collected data.

2.2. Research Participants

In this study, 120 grade 12 students were randomly selected as research participants and 114 of them fully completed and returned the questionnaire. The study focused on these students because assessing problems that likely affect their learning at this level will be beneficial to suggest possible interventional solutions. These students are at the turning point to join higher education institutions, so they should be prepared not only to pass the entrance exam but also to prepare themselves for the next demanding academic endeavor where their English language proficiency affects their academic success in different fields of study. They need more support ever than before.

In selecting the sample, the simple random sampling technique was used because, as [18] notes, it delivers chances for everyone to be a member of the sample. Therefore, the way the samples were selected and the sampling technique employed seem to be logical and convincing.

2.3. Data Gathering Tools

In order to address the research question, a close-ended five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used. The advantage of closed-ended questionnaires is that they usually make the questionnaire easier and quicker to fill in and facilitate more reliable scoring of the data [19] and the Likert scale questionnaire is helpful to ask and elicit data about someone’s beliefs, attitudes, views, perceptions, belief or attitude or perception as s/he can express his/her level of agreement to the give statements related to a particular issue. It also gives privacy to participants,
especially when identity is not required and the researcher's
direct interaction is minimized, thereby encouraging
participants to express themselves freely [20], especially for
students who may be afraid of exposing their teachers’
instructional practices.

2.4. Methods of Data Analysis

The relevant quantitative data collected through the five-
point likert questionnaire (with scale values 1: strongly
agree, 2: agree, 3: undecided; 4: disagree, and 5: strongly
disagree) was entered into SPSS software version 24 that
facilitated the data analysis process. In analyzing the data,
descriptive statistics, particularly the individual item means,
overall means, and standard deviations were used. In
processing the data, the mean serves to give the average
value for all respondents to the item/items with the
implication that the groups of respondents were in favor of
/against a particular item. This is helpful in discussing and
interpreting the data because using percentage alone
appears to be somewhat weaker for interpreting and
discussing the collected data.

### Table 1. Cronbach alpha values for perception items.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reliability Statistics</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach's Alpha</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability Statistics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach's Alpha</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Table 2. Students’ perceptions towards EFL teachers Differentiated and undifferentiated instructional practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A). Items related to differentiated instructional practices</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. My English teacher addresses the different learning needs of all students by adjusting his/her teaching methods</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My English teacher vary the difficulty levels of activities to challenges high achievers</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My English teacher has appropriate expectations of learning for all students</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My English teacher designs different activities based on students’ strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My English teacher usually encourages the high achievers to work with the low achievers.</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. My English teacher most frequently gives us the opportunities to work in pairs, groups, alone, and in whole-class discussions to promote active learning.</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. My English teacher creates a conducive (relaxed) classroom learning environment by adjusting his/her teaching</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. My English teacher maintains a motivating, an orderly, purposeful classroom learning environment</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. My English teacher gives individual support for struggling students in case they face difficulties in their learning (e.g.: scaffolding).</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. My English teacher adjusts the pacing to the student’s readiness (current knowledge or skills levels)</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. In my English class, I feel safe and comfortable, not frustrated all the time</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. My English teacher provides additional or challenging activities for those early finishers</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. My English teacher is approachable and has a good relationship with almost all students</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. My English teacher provides us different activities/tasks at d/t difficulty levels to promote learning for all</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. My English teacher helps the low achievers by providing different activities to their levels</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. My English teacher works on different activities based on our interests</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. My English teacher fairly assesses students’ learning by designing different activities, absent in the textbook.</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I feel that my English teacher makes every possible effort to help all students learn English successfully</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall mean</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B). Items related to following the one-size-fits-all conventional approach</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19. My English teacher mostly focuses on the textbook activities in teaching English</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. My English teacher mostly starts teaching at the grade levels, not to the students’ levels of learning (readiness)</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. My English teacher mostly uses the same-teaching strategy to the levels of the majority (middle level)</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. My English teacher hardly gives attention to low achievers and high achievers in teaching English</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall mean</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data given in table 1 showed the Cronbach alpha
values for differentiated and undifferentiated instructional
practices. The data given in the second table shows the
students’ responses or opinions about their teachers’ efforts in
facilitating learning for all that can be achieved by
integrating differentiated instructional practices in the regular
EFL class. The last four items were deliberately included to
cross-check if teachers were following the one-size-fits-all
instructional practices as perceived by their students and for
collection purposes.

Accordingly, referring to the first four items 1, 2, 4, 14,
and 18 less than half of the students, 31%-41% of the student
participants reported that EFL teachers address the different
learning needs of all students by adjusting their teaching
methods, varying the difficulty levels of activities to
challenges high achievers, and providing students different

3. Findings

As presented in Table 1, the reliability of the Likert-scale
questionnaire was entered into SPSS software, version 24,
and analyzed quantitatively. The Cronbach's alpha value of
the overall items, the first 18 items, related to the teachers’
differentiated instructional practices was found to be 0.92.
This indicates that the items were highly reliable for the first
18 items. The Alpha value for the second 4 items related to
the teachers’ undifferentiated instructional practices was
found to be 0.57. This value seems to be lower may be due to
the smaller number of items presented to the participants, but
it is still acceptable because the number of items could be the
reason for lower reliability, Cronbach alpha value.
activities/tasks at different difficulty levels to promote learning for all students, and fairly assess students’ performance by designing different activities. Item number 17 also reflects that below half of the students felt that their English teacher fairly assesses students’ performance by designing different activities, not given in the textbook. This clearly reflects that the majority of the students expressed their disagreement that their teachers challenge the high achievers, vary instructional strategies to help all students learn, and fairly assess their students according to their areas of weakness and strengths.

In a similar vein, referring to the last four items (19, 20, 21, and 22), the large majority of the students (65%, 60%, 78%, and 67%) of the total respondents expressed their agreement that their English teachers mostly focus on the textbook given activities, use the same-teaching strategy to the middle level, mostly starts teaching at the grade levels, not to the students’ levels of learning (readiness) and hardly give attention to low achievers and high achievers in teaching English. The mean values also reflect that the teachers were mainly following the one-size-fits-all mode of teaching that lacks flexibility.

Related to items number 3, 6, and 7, almost an equal number of students reported that their teachers give them the opportunity to work in pairs, groups, and alone that promotes active learning, have appropriate expectations of learning for all students, and create conducive classroom learning environment. This indicates that the majority of the students were in favor of their teachers’ practices in allowing them to work alone, in pairs, and in whole-class discussions as reported by the students that can be taken as the characteristics of the one-size-fits-all traditional approach if it is not systematically and intentionally done.

Regarding the students’ responses for items 7, 8, and 13, the students were slightly positive about their teachers’ efforts in creating a conducive learning environment, maintaining purposeful classroom situations, and having a good rapport with almost all students. students’ teachers’ relationships, grouping students to work together, maintaining a conducive classroom learning environment.

In general, considering the mean values, overall mean, and individual men values, rather than the percentage, Overall, the mean values for each item related to differentiated instructional practices ranged from 2.47 to 2.79 and the overall mean value was also found to be 2.67. The individual mean value showed that the respondents didn’t agree that EFL teachers differentiate their instructional practices. The mean value of 2.67 also shows that it is out of the range that students either agree or strongly agree. Thus, the data clearly indicated that the students didn’t express their agreement that their teachers were promoting learning for all through differentiated instructional practices. However, in their responses to the items directly related to the undifferentiated instructional practices, the individual mean values that varied from 2.12 to 2.37, supported by the overall mean value, 2.39 is strong evidence that the EFL teachers are predominantly following the undifferentiated, one-size-fits-all, instructional practices in teaching English that no longer promote learning for all.

4. Discussions of Findings

Teachers do have the same goal of promoting learning for all their students which can best be achieved through differentiated instruction practices. Thus, the purpose of this study was to assess and describe the high school students’ perceptions towards the efforts of EFL teachers in maximizing learning for all students with diverse learning needs. Differentiated instruction is the teachers’ proactive response to the diverse learners’ needs [5] and accommodates the students’ readiness levels, learning profiles and interests [6, 5] and learning needs [5], and different areas of strengths and weaknesses. DI can be translated into classroom practices using different instructional strategies like tiered instructions, anchoring activities and assignments, flexible grouping, giving choices, changing the pace of learning, cooperative learning among several others.

Accordingly, in answering the research question, relevant data were collected through a five-point Likert scale questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS software Version 24 that facilitated the data analysis process. The key findings of the study showed that the great majority of the students’ responses reflected that EFL teachers’ instructional practices were found to vary from no to little differentiation. In support of this, the overall mean value, 2.67, for the items that related to differentiated instruction proved that the students were not in favor of the teacher’s differentiated instructional practices. The overall mean value, 2.30, too confirmed the predominant use of the one-size-fits-all conventional approach.

Using the one-size-fits-all conventional approach whereby teachers are teaching to the middle levels [1] that no longer serves the diverse needs of the contemporary classrooms’ situations. It is evident that a great majority of the responses (78%) reflected that the students were taught to the middle level which leaves the advanced students unchallenged and may lead them to show off-task classroom behaviors and the struggling ones feel frustrated in their attempts to achieve learning objectives.

The findings of this study also showed that a large majority of the students, with a high mean value 2.97, reported that students didn’t express their agreement that EFL teachers address the different learning needs of all students by adjusting/her teaching methods, but “teachers differentiate their instructions to respond to the learners’ needs in the way the content is presented, the way content is learned, and the way students respond to the content” [21].

In other words, teachers differentiating instructions make relevant adjustments to the contents of the lessons, lesson delivery/process, and assessment aspects of their teaching to address the diverse learning needs of their students. This mode of teaching engages students, considers their variations in readiness to learn, and uses their interests and differences to enhance their learning, and doing so is a reality in some foreign language class [22]. Besides, it was also found out that the large majority with a high mean value, 2.88, also
remained doubtful in expressing their opinions or views that they felt the EFL teacher make. The students’ doubtful response about the EFL teachers’ attempts or making every possible effort to help all students to learn English successfully is in total contradictions with the actual practices of differentiating instructions because in Tomlinson’s words, “Differentiated instruction consists of all efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom, and whenever a teacher reaches to an individual or small group to vary his or her teaching in order to create the best learning experience possible, that teacher is differentiating instruction [23] making use of differentiated instructional strategies like flexible grouping, tiered activities/tasks, anchored activities and curriculum compacting (for advanced students), varying their questions, scaffolding techniques (for struggling students), varying the pace of teaching among several others. Teachers differentiating instructions do modify and/or adjust the contents of their teaching, lesson delivery or teaching methods, their instructional resources to match the diverse learning needs, aptitudes, and characteristics of the mixed ability groups of students [24, 25] consisting of students with varied receptive and productive skills, fluency and accuracy work, grammatical knowledge, size of vocabulary and several others [26].

The preliminary survey conducted by [27] also confirmed that teachers in Addis Ababa elementary schools are using the one-size-fits-all conventional approach. His findings differed from the current study in that he assessed differentiated instructional practices from teachers’ perspectives, missing students’ voices. Besides, his findings focused on the practices of differentiated instructions particular to the teaching of English vocabulary whereas the current study focused on students’ perceptions or perspectives without which instructive innovations may not be successful.

In another study, [14] also conducted a general assessment on the perceptions, practices and challenges of differentiated instruction on primary school teachers. The findings of this study too proved that teachers are following the one-size-fits-all instructional approach despite teaching diverse groups of students with diverse learning needs, areas of strengths and weaknesses. The study further found out that teachers’ languages, including English, and mathematics, relatively differentiated instructions better than other teachers in the natural and social sciences. This study too missed students’ voices that shouldn’t be because giving attention to students’ opinions may help teachers to live up to their expectations and contribute for the successful implementations of educational innovations. Thus, the current study attempted to assess and describe the students’ perceptions towards EFL teachers differentiated instructional practices in promoting learning for all, but the results showed that they perceived it unfavorable. One important finding that this study figured out was that results supported the other studies that confirmed that teachers predominantly use the one-size-fits-all traditional mode of teaching as the studies DI practices in different educational levels from teachers’ perspectives.

5. Conclusions

Differentiated instruction is an innovative and/or responsive instructional practice for meeting the different learning needs of students and/or accommodating the different readiness levels in a single classroom. This study attempted to assess students’ perceptions towards the efforts of their English teachers in promoting learning for all, differentiating instructions. The findings of the current study evidenced the predominant use of the one-size-fits-all mode of teaching that doesn’t adequately support learning for all students with different readiness levels; there exists almost no instructional differentiation as perceived by the student participants. Accordingly, the study concluded that the students had unfavorable perceptions towards EFL teachers differentiated instructional practices that promote learning for all students.

Based on this conclusion, the following suggestions were forwarded. Firstly, in response to the students’ unfavorable perceptions towards EFL teachers differentiated instructional practices, EFL teachers should integrate differentiated instructions in their regular classrooms in an attempt to promote learning for all while responding to the different learning needs of all students. To respond to the diverse learning needs, while accommodating students’ readiness levels, of the students in the contemporary classrooms, teachers should be given in-service awareness training on this innovative and flexible instructional approach to be used in an Ethiopian EFL contexts. It is also better to conduct interventional studies to alleviate the pitfalls following the one-size-fits-all approach that no longer adequately meets the needs of diverse students in contemporary classroom situations. Finally, future studies should be conducted involving larger participants because this is a small-scale study involving one school with a small number of participants.

References


