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Виконавець: студентка 4-го курсу
Бакша Ребека Калманівна

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Department of Philology

Qualifying paper

DIFFERENTIATION IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Level of higher education: Bachelor's degree

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ЗМІСТ

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INTRODUCTION

There is no such person as a general language learner. The twenty-first century has brought significant changes, including the growing recognition that no two learners are the same: they differ in terms of age, cognitive styles, gender, learning pace and style, motivation, language proficiency, interests, background, they have different mother tongues and learning disabilities. These individual differences pose a challenge for language teachers aiming to deliver effective and inclusive instruction. A one-size-fits-all teaching approach cannot effectively address such diverse classroom settings.

Differentiated instruction (DI) offers a response to this challenge by emphasizing the adaptation of teaching methods, content, process, product, or environment to meet the diverse needs of learners.

According to Heacox (2012) and Tomlinson (2017), with differentiation, teachers have the chance to address the students' individual needs in order to make their learning process successful and meaningful. Given the significance of this approach for effective teaching and learning, this research-based paper presents an overview of differentiation.

A considerable body of research has addressed differentiation as a pedagogical approach. Tomlinson (2001) laid the foundation by defining differentiation as a proactive process of adjusting instruction to accommodate students' varied readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Studies have shown that differentiation promotes intellectual growth, improves comprehension of key concepts, increases student interest, and helps them make significant progress (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020).

Despite its growing prominence, research investigating DI in practice (Aftab, 2016; Aldossari, 2018; Kotob & Abadi, 2019; Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023) has shown that many teachers continue to struggle with the practical implementation in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. This highlights a pressing need for further research to explore both the potential and the limitations of this approach in real educational settings.

The present study **aims** to fill this gap by investigating how differentiation is understood and applied in EFL teaching in Transcarpathia, with a focus on the opportunities it provides and the challenges it entails. The region presents a unique linguistic and socio-political landscape, where teachers often navigate diverse learner profiles.

The **object** of this study is the process of differentiation in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The **subject** of the research is the implementation of differentiated instruction

in EFL classrooms in Transcarpathia, including teachers' strategies, beliefs, and the challenges they face.

The **main tasks** of the thesis are as follows:

- To analyse the theoretical background of differentiation in the EFL context;
- To examine how teachers perceive and apply differentiation in practice;
- To identify the strategies used by teachers to address learners' individual needs;
- To investigate the challenges teachers encounter when implementing differentiation.
- To summarize findings and pedagogical implications for improving differentiation in EFL classrooms, and search for the answers to the main research questions guiding the study are as follows:

1. To what extent are Transcarpathian EFL teachers aware of and understand the concept and principles of differentiation? Have they primarily acquired this knowledge through participation in professional development, or have they informed themselves independently?

2. How does the professional profile of teachers (e.g., teaching experience, age groups taught, language levels taught) influence their attitudes toward using differentiation?

3. To what extent is differentiated instruction implemented in practice in Transcarpathian EFL classrooms, and which differentiation strategies are used most frequently?

4. In which learner-need context do Transcarpathian EFL teachers most often apply differentiation?

5. What perceived benefits and challenges do Transcarpathian EFL teachers experience in the process of implementing differentiated instruction?

6. How do teachers' beliefs regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of differentiation influence their willingness to regularly integrate it into their teaching practice?

The research combines theoretical and empirical **methods**. The theoretical component includes the review and analysis of scholarly literature on differentiation and EFL pedagogy and takes place in the first two parts. The third, empirical part is based on qualitative and quantitative data collection through interviews and a questionnaire, so **the methods of data analysis** are qualitative and quantitative.

The novelty of this research lies in its exploration of the implementation of differentiation in a specific regional context, Transcarpathia. The findings may inform teacher training programs, and by combining theory with teachers' beliefs, this study helps bridge the gap between pedagogical theory and practice.

The thesis is divided into three main parts. Part I provides background for the study and presents a review of scholarly literature on differentiation in the EFL context. It outlines the key factors that contribute to learner diversity and the advantages and disadvantages of differentiation.

Part II provides insights into the empirical studies on the topic of differentiation and explores different approaches and strategies for implementing it. Part III presents the empirical component of the research, explains the methods of data collection and analysis, reports the results of the survey, and discusses findings in related to research questions.

The study concludes with a summary of the results with pedagogical implications and recommendations for future research.

PART I.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF DIFFERENTIATION

With the spread of English as a global lingua franca, the rise in the number of non-native English speakers, and the recognition of various English varieties – known as World Englishes – alongside increased migration and globalization, the field of English language teaching (further ELT) has become remarkably diverse. English classes now include students from a wide range of linguistic, educational, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds. Teachers face daily challenges related to the diversity of their classrooms, particularly as it grows. Given these and similar factors, teachers need to develop strategies that enable them to effectively support diverse groups of learners in their language learning journeys. However, this need is often at odds with the one-size-fits-all approach commonly used in textbooks, supplementary materials, and educational technologies aimed at broad market appeal (Raza, 2020).

But what exactly is the one-size-fits-all approach? Maria Eisenmann (2019) addresses a theory that is now widely seen as outdated yet still lingers in education: the hypothesis of homogeneity. This theory assumes that all students in a school or group possess the same skills and competencies. It also implies that applying the same methods uniformly should lead all learners to reach the same goal simultaneously. While this assumption is now recognized as obsolete and unsuitable for language teaching, it still influences educational practices (Eisenmann, 2019).

Teachers and those invested in education now increasingly acknowledge individual student differences. However, this progress is limited, as the broader educational system often continues to create homogeneous learning groups. Many teachers view the class through a generalized lens, assessing students against an undefined standard that overlooks individual capabilities. This approach diminishes the effectiveness of language teaching, preventing students from reaching their full potential (ibid.).

Recognizing that every classroom contains a variety of interests, skills, and abilities, it's clear that an imagined "average" student can no longer serve as the model for language instruction (ibid.).

In the following subsections, it will be discussed how other professionals define differences between language learners; what differentiation is and how it differs from individualisation; and what its advantages and disadvantages are.

1.1 Differences among language learners

Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) suggest that individuals vary due to a range of biological factors, environmental influences, or unconscious forces shaped by past experiences. While some differences are easy to observe in everyday interactions, understanding individual differences requires thorough research. Key differences that affect learning include age, gender, aptitude, motivation, learning styles, strategies, and personality. These interconnected factors significantly impact language learning, though they are often overlooked in research, where linguistic factors tend to be prioritized (Raza, 2020).

Individual factors like motivation, autonomy, and positive beliefs play a significant role in learning success. Motivated learners invest time and effort (Nikolaeva & Sinekop, 2020), and those who believe in their abilities and take ownership of their learning often achieve better outcomes (Othman, 2024). However, factors such as age, gender, personality, and learning style show mixed results in predicting success (Oxford, 2018).

While individual differences significantly impact the pace and success of acquiring both first and second languages, a key distinction is that, except in cases of brain injury or severe environmental deprivation, first language acquisition generally succeeds universally, whereas success in second or foreign language learning varies greatly. As experts note, learners of an additional language differ not only in their rate of acquisition but also in their ultimate proficiency levels, with only a few reaching native-like competence and others falling far behind (Pawlak, 2012).

This variability in achievement is influenced by numerous factors, including natural exposure, instructional duration and intensity, teacher skill and dedication, teaching methodologies, materials used, and group dynamics. However, individual learner differences are essential in determining success or failure in second language acquisition. Cohen and Dörnyei (2002) suggest that when individuals start learning a second language, they bring with them significant "personal baggage" that will greatly impact their learning progress. Research has identified key components of this learner "baggage," which influence how quickly and effectively the language is acquired. Factors like age, aptitude, motivation, and strategy use are strongly linked to successful outcomes, highlighting their predictive power in language learning. Although these factors interact with each other and with contextual variables such as task type or pedagogical interventions, their importance in learning a second language is undeniable (ibid.).

The most common learner differences include: gender, age, intelligence, ability, interest, prior knowledge, learning style, motivation, locus of control, self-efficacy, and epistemological beliefs. Ortega, Cabrera, and Benalcázar (2018) emphasize the importance for teachers to

recognize learners' diverse backgrounds, languages, cultures, readiness, learning preferences, interests, needs, and learning profiles (Ortega et al., 2018).

For example, research suggests that female learners tend to employ a broader range of language learning strategies. They are particularly more inclined to apply metacognitive strategies, such as goal-setting, planning, record-keeping, and monitoring. However, other studies point out that gender differences in strategy use are not always clear-cut. Strategy preferences appear to be shaped not only by gender, but are also influenced by the interaction between gender and proficiency (Lee & Oxford, 2008).

Furthermore, learners bring their individual personality traits to the language learning process, which can either aid or impede successful language acquisition. Some key personality characteristics that influence language learning effectiveness include:

- Self-esteem, one's sense of self-worth.
- Extroversion or introversion: extroverts tend to have better short-term memory, greater resilience to stress, and lower anxiety during language production than introverts.
- Risk-taking: students who are more willing to take risks tend to engage more actively in language learning.
- Inhibition: a tendency to be self-conscious or shy in learning environments.
- Tolerance of ambiguity: this trait positively influences listening comprehension.

Additionally, language learners exhibit different learning styles, which are typically classified as analytic or global. Analytic learners focus on rules and accuracy, while global learners emphasize fluency over detailed accuracy (Huszti, 2005).

Huszti's research indicates that learners use a variety of strategies to facilitate foreign language acquisition, which includes "behaviours or actions that learners use to improve their success, self-direction, and enjoyment of learning." According to the Oxford Taxonomy, these strategies include:

- Memory strategies: such as repeating a word to memorize it.
- Cognitive strategies: for example, inferring the meaning of a word from its context.
- Compensation strategies: like using a similar word when the exact one is unknown.
- Metacognitive strategies: for instance, planning learning activities.
- Affective strategies: such as rewarding oneself after completing a task.
- Social strategies: like seeking opportunities to interact with native speakers (ibid.).

1.2 The concept of differentiation

Differentiation is often broadly defined but is essential for recognizing and meeting the diverse needs of all learners. It is every learner's right to have these needs addressed, and it falls to teachers to find effective ways to cater to the abilities and requirements of their students, adapting these approaches within the curriculum through suitable teaching and learning styles. Differentiation plays a crucial role in achieving this goal (Convery & Coyle, 1993).

Differentiation involves planning with learner differences in mind, acknowledging that students vary in both the quality and speed of their learning. This approach demands flexibility and adaptability, guiding educators in what to teach and how to teach based on students' needs (McLelland & Coffey, 2021).

Convery and Coyle (1993) describe differentiation as a process where teachers create opportunities for students to progress at their own pace and unlock their potential through various learning activities. Reese, referencing Carol Ann Tomlinson's The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to All Learners, explains that in differentiated classrooms, teachers begin from students' current knowledge rather than the curriculum's starting point. These teachers embrace learner differences and engage students with varied learning methods, interests, paces, and levels of instructional complexity (Reese, 2011).

Ortega, Cabrera, and Benalcázar (2018), based on Heacox's (2012) work, argue that Differentiated Instruction (DI) is not simply a teaching strategy but an approach focused on maximizing each learner's development and success by adapting content, process, and product to their needs. DI aims to meet each student where they are in the learning journey (Ortega et al., 2018).

Additionally, these authors defining differentiation as an approach involving assessment of students' readiness, modification of instruction, promotion of collaboration and autonomy, and a blend of teaching and practice. Such an approach incorporates diverse teaching methods, activities, assessment options, and ongoing needs analysis (ibid.).

Differentiated teaching methods are as critical in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms as they are in other subjects. Exploring strategies to tailor content, process, product, and the learning environment helps EFL teachers support students in developing communication skills and language proficiency. Differentiated instruction is an inclusive teaching approach that addresses unique student needs to ensure no one is left behind. However, a significant question remains: how can differentiated instruction help EFL teachers guide all students toward achieving a consistent level of English proficiency by term's end, preparing them for standardized tests? (Gaitas et al., 2022)

This question is particularly relevant in Ukraine, where, according to the Ministry of Education and Science, primary school students achieve only an incomplete Starter/Beginner level (A1). By grade 9, secondary students in general education schools reach A2, while those in specialized language programs attain B1. Secondary students completing their education achieve B1 or B2 levels, respectively (URL 4).

1.3 Differentiation vs. Individualisation

The concept of individualisation has a longstanding tradition in Romanian pedagogical literature, emphasizing that education should be prepared according to student individuality. Researches argued that a learner's individuality is the set of qualities by which a person differs from others. This individuality encompasses not only the general attributes of the human body and mind but also unique personal traits, skills, and capacities. Factors such as temperament, age, sex, and the dynamic interplay between physical and spiritual influences shape a student's individuality, which is a cornerstone of genuine school education (Frunză & Petre, 2014).

In the United States, individualisation and differentiation encompass a range of methods and approaches designed to address the unique psychological traits of learners in language education. In French pedagogy, individualisation focuses on enhancing learners' self-directed work based on their abilities. Researchers interpret individualisation in varied ways, viewing it as a method, a teaching strategy, and an educational principle. Some studies treat individualisation and differentiation as equivalent; however, detailed analysis reveals clear distinctions (Lahodynskyi-Semeniako, 2018).

Individualisation involves accommodating learners' specific characteristics and capabilities within a unified curriculum and the same training group. Differentiation, on the other hand, can be understood as a type of individualisation that groups learners according to their unique psychological traits (ibid., p. 108).

Both individualisation and differentiation in language education can be seen as guiding principles that create favourable conditions for learning. By factoring in students' psychological characteristics and incorporating personalized methods, these approaches aim to foster continuous improvement in foreign language proficiency and encourage the development of active, creative personalities (ibid., p. 109).

Differentiation and individualisation are both instructional approaches that aim to meet diverse student needs, but they differ from each other:

Aspect	Differentiation	Individualisation
Definition	Differentiation is the practice of tailoring instruction to meet the varied needs, abilities, interests, or readiness levels of a group of students.	Individualisation refers to tailoring instruction specifically to meet the unique needs of each individual student. It often involves personalized goals and learning plans.
Focus	Classroom or group context	Student-specific, potentially beyond the classroom
Pacing	The teacher sets the pace	The student determines the pace
Student's role	Students are generally grouped or given choices within a framework designed by the teacher. While there may be some student autonomy, the teacher sets the overall structure.	Students take on a more active role in their learning, often working at their own pace and level. Individualisation often includes self-directed learning and personalized feedback.
Teacher's role	Teachers proactively design lessons that include different entry points, challenges, and supports, ensuring all students can engage with and understand the material.	Teachers act as facilitators, creating custom learning paths or activities for each student.
Scope	Differentiation is usually applied within the context of a classroom or group of students.	Individualisation extends beyond the classroom and can involve one-on-one instruction, self-paced programs, or independent study.
Example	A teacher might create three versions of the same task:	A student works on a personalized reading

	• A basic version for students who need foundational support • A standard version for the majority • An advanced version for those who are ready for more challenge	program where they choose their own books, set goals with the teacher, and progress based on their reading level and interest.

Table 1. *Comparing differentiation and individualisation* (Own editing, based on: Lahodynskyi-Semeniako, 2018)

1.4 Advantages and disadvantages of Differentiation

Learning English as a second language can be challenging, particularly due to the structural differences between English and a learner's native language (Manik & Suwastini, 2020). This challenge is further compounded by the unique qualities and needs of individual students (Ul-Hassan et al., 2019). As a result, the teaching process must account for these individual differences, placing students at the centre of instruction. In this approach, the teacher primarily acts as a facilitator, employing methods and strategies tailored to support students effectively throughout their learning journey (Bahous et al., 2011).

To address such needs, Tomlinson (2017) introduced Differentiated Instruction (DI), a teaching methodology designed to accommodate the diverse needs of students. DI is characterized as a forward-thinking, student-centred, and qualitative process based on assessment-driven approaches. It includes strategies for teaching entire classes, smaller groups, and individual learners (Tomlinson, 2017).

Effective implementation of DI requires teachers to evaluate several factors, such as students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This understanding enables teachers to create instruction that enhances learning outcomes and provides appropriate support for all students. Recognizing and addressing the diverse needs within a classroom ensures that instruction helps all students achieve success and reach their potential (Ortega et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2017).

Research consistently highlights the benefits of differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. Studies have shown that DI promotes intellectual growth, increases student interest, enhances comprehension of key concepts, and helps students make significant progress (Kotob & Abadi, 2019; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020b; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019). For instance, Kotob and

Abadi (2019) found that DI led to significant improvements in the academic performance of low-achieving students, while Magableh and Abdullah (2020) demonstrated that DI effectively addresses classrooms with varying skill levels. Moreover, DI promotes an inclusive classroom setting that encourages active engagement and collaboration, helping students feel more connected to the learning process. This shift also redefines the teacher's role from an authority figure to a facilitator, motivating both students and educators alike (Celik, 2019).

However, implementing DI is not without challenges. Researchers have highlighted difficulties in integrating it effectively into classrooms (Aftab, 2016; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Naka, 2018).

Differentiated instruction has also been shown to enhance specific skills in EFL learners. ts effectiveness is demonstrated in improving writing skills. In an experimental study involving 90 sophomore EFL students, the group receiving DI interventions showed significant improvement in post-test scores compared to pre-test results. This finding underscores DI's value in addressing diverse learning preferences and boosting overall language proficiency (Dabr, 2021).

Similarly, Magableh and Abdullah (2020) examined the impact of DI on reading comprehension in Jordanian fourth and fifth-grade students. Their study revealed that students taught through DI outperformed those receiving conventional instruction, highlighting improvements in reading comprehension and overall performance. Additionally, their research explored DI's effects on English achievement among eighth-grade students. The results indicated that DI not only reduced performance disparities but also enhanced students' motivation to learn English, showcasing its effectiveness in diverse classroom settings (ibid.).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that DI is a powerful tool for addressing the varied needs of students. By tailoring instruction to individual interests, preferences, and readiness levels, teachers can create an environment where students feel more confident and capable in their language learning journey. The success of DI largely depends on thoughtful implementation, including the selection of appropriate strategies to meet students' needs. When effectively applied, DI not only fosters greater academic achievement but also cultivates a positive and inclusive atmosphere that supports all learners (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019).

Despite its many advantages, implementing differentiated instruction (DI) comes with significant challenges. Teachers often face numerous hurdles in adapting their teaching methods to accommodate diverse learner needs. Addressing student variability is essential for preventing low academic performance, yet adapting content, activities, and expectations to each student's abilities requires significant effort. In mixed-ability EFL classrooms, managing this diversity is one of the most difficult tasks for teachers. Preparing for such variability demands extensive pre-

instruction work, including pre-assessments to evaluate students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Naka, 2018).

Key obstacles include high student-to-teacher ratios, insufficient pre-service training for teachers, a lack of suitable tools for implementing DI, and reliance on traditional teaching methods (Aldossari, 2018). Limited resources, time constraints, and the additional effort required for lesson preparation frequently hinder teachers from making the necessary adjustments (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Widiati et al., 2023). For instance, deep and meaningful learning requires adequate time, yet time limitations are a common barrier to implementing DI effectively (Porta & Todd, 2022).

Many teachers report that the lack of planning and instructional time poses the most significant challenge when designing and delivering differentiated instruction (Aftab, 2016). Constraints often force them to resort to uniform instruction for the entire class, neglecting the diverse needs of their students. For example, some teachers rely solely on standard textbooks instead of using varied resources like jigsaws or graphic organizers due to the pressure to complete the syllabus within a limited timeframe (Chien, 2012).

Moreover, teachers' roles in DI require a fundamental shift from being controllers to facilitators of learning. However, practical issues, such as time pressures and curriculum demands, can cause them to revert to traditional teaching methods they find more familiar. Additionally, a lack of understanding of DI's foundational concepts may prevent teachers from fully appreciating its benefits, leading to negative perceptions and a reluctance to embrace the approach (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019).

To overcome these challenges, teachers must adopt a mindset that values and accommodates classroom diversity. This involves regularly reassessing students' needs and reimagining lesson plans to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all. Effective DI requires a commitment to adapting instructional methods continuously and employing a variety of teaching strategies to address individual differences. Only by embracing these adjustments can educators create an inclusive and effective learning environment that supports all learners (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

In summary, teaching is often compared to bowling – where the goal is to aim for the middle and reach the majority of students. This approach neglects the diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles present in every classroom. Education is not about hitting an "average" target; it's about recognizing and addressing the unique potential of each learner (URL1).

Teaching requires intentional differentiation to ensure all students – not just those in the metaphorical middle – have equal opportunities to succeed. Focusing on the majority risks leaving behind those who need more support or those who are ready for greater challenges. Effective

teaching is inclusive and dynamic, adapting to meet the needs of every student, not just the "most" (ibid.).

Differentiated instruction (DI) acknowledges that students have distinct learning styles, strengths, and preferences. It involves tailoring teaching methods to design, deliver, and assess content in ways that accommodate these differences (ibid.).

PART II.
DIFFERENTIATED METHODS IN THE PRACTICE

Diversity in schools has become a prevalent reality, making differentiated instruction increasingly essential. Research highlights that differentiation effectively increases engagement while addressing students' individual differences (Tomlinson, 2017ji; Heacox, 2012). Teachers face the challenge of respecting these differences and adapting their teaching methods to support each student's success. The primary goal of differentiated instruction is to maximize student growth by aligning instruction with individual needs (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015). No single method ensures the development of every student; however, differentiated instruction can facilitate this process.

In the following subsections, we will explore who and how they researched the topic and what they found. What does differentiation look like in practice? What does it mean for a teacher to differentiate and what does it entail?

2.1 Strategies for Differentiation in practice

Learning English as a second language presents considerable challenges, particularly due to the linguistic differences between the target language and a learner's native tongue. These challenges are further compounded by the unique characteristics of each individual student. To effectively address these issues, the learning process must prioritize the accommodation of these individual differences. This approach places students at the centre of instruction, with teachers assuming the role of facilitators who identify and implement the most appropriate strategies to support student learning (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

A classroom consisting of students with diverse individual characteristics is referred to as 'heterogeneous.' This diversity creates specific challenges for both learners and teachers, often manifesting in issues such as maintaining discipline, keeping students engaged, selecting and utilizing suitable teaching materials, and ensuring the active participation of all students in lesson activities (Huszti, 2005).

There are various well-established and widely recognized methods for teaching, training, and developing English learners that ensure successful outcomes in the educational process. Differentiated instruction involves incorporating these activities while considering the individual learning characteristics of students within the educational context (Gregory & Chapman, 2013).

Differentiated Instruction (DI), popularized by Tomlinson (2017), embodies this student-centred philosophy. It is a purposeful, flexible approach designed to address student diversity. DI is characterized as visionary, learner-focused, qualitative, and grounded in assessments. It involves a range of instructional methods, including whole-class, small-group, and individualised teaching (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

Three key instructional components can be adapted through differentiation:

    a) Content – What students are expected to learn during a lesson.

    b) Process – How students engage with and complete learning activities.

    c) Product – How students demonstrate their understanding.

Teachers should consider how to make equitable adjustments for individual learners in each of these areas (ibid.).

Differentiated instruction benefits all subjects, including English. Research highlights improvements in students' academic skills, behaviour, and teacher satisfaction when this method is applied. For example, one study showed that students taught using differentiated methods had a stronger grasp of math concepts than peers in traditional classrooms. This approach could similarly accelerate English language acquisition while simplifying teaching tasks. It can be an ideal situation for DI, when:

- A student has limited prior knowledge of a topic compared to peers.
- A student understands a topic but struggles to demonstrate it on assessments.
- A student has a disability that impacts their ability to complete tasks at the same pace.
- Some students display lower-level reading skills, while others are at advanced levels.
- Certain students struggle with concepts their classmates easily understand (ibid.).

Veteran teachers like Larry Ferlazzo and Katie Hull Synieski offer tips on techniques of differentiation. Effective instruction for English-language learners involves strategies that make lessons accessible to students with diverse language abilities. Fairness in teaching doesn't mean treating everyone equally; it means tailoring resources and methods to support each learner's unique needs. The focus should always be on finding ways to make the content accessible to all and adjusting methods to achieve this goal. Not every student will use the same materials or approaches, but adapting to individual needs ensures fairness by meeting students where they are (URL2).

    1) Strategies for differentiating content:

      a) provide content in multiple formats

Students learn differently, relying on visual, auditory, reading/writing, or kinesthetic modalities. While it's impractical to customize materials for every individual, you can design lessons that accommodate multiple learning styles (URL1).

For instance:

- Use group reading to support both visual and auditory learners.
- Accompany videos with subtitles to cater to multiple modalities.
- Incorporate hands-on materials like realia alongside traditional resources.

b) match content to students' need

Students operate at different skill levels, as outlined by Bloom's Taxonomy. Some can recall and understand information, while others can analyse and apply it.

To differentiate effectively:

- Assess your students to identify their individual skill levels.
- Tailor activities so lower-level learners focus on basic recall and understanding, while advanced students work on application and analysis.
- Use texts of varying complexity (novels, short stories) at appropriate reading levels.

For example, worksheets on the same topic can be modified to suit different skill levels. Lower-level tasks might focus on recognition and comprehension, while higher-level tasks could involve deeper analysis and problem-solving (ibid).

2) Differentiating the learning process

a) grouping students by abilities

Dividing your class into smaller groups based on their knowledge or skill levels can be an effective way to tailor instruction to specific needs. This method allows you to provide content that aligns with each group's abilities, making the learning process more approachable and comfortable for students (URL1).

A key strategy in these groups is peer scaffolding, where students collaborate on tasks, sharing knowledge and supporting one another. When group members have similar skill levels, they are more likely to understand and communicate effectively, which fosters a more comfortable and productive learning environment (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

Additionally, explaining concepts to each group at a level they can collectively grasp ensures that all students feel included and capable, enhancing their overall learning experience.

- Employing flexible grouping based on readiness, interests, or learning profiles (e.g., working in pairs, small groups, or independently).
- Incorporating choice boards and graded activities tailored to individual needs.

b) allocating time for struggling students

When designing lessons, it's essential to dedicate time to assist students who may need extra help. While some students may complete tasks quickly, others might require more guidance and support to succeed (URL1).

To accommodate this, plan lessons with tasks that can be completed slightly ahead of schedule, leaving time for follow-up. For students who finish early, prepare additional activities to keep them engaged. These could include:

- Extra worksheets with small rewards for completion.

- Fun, enriching activities designed to challenge advanced learners.

Meanwhile, use the freed-up time to move around the classroom and provide individualised assistance to students who are finding the material more challenging. This approach ensures that all learners receive the support they need while keeping advanced students actively engaged (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

3) Differentiating the product

a) implement rubrics for diverse skill levels

Rubrics are effective tools for assessing students' proficiency across various skill levels. Typically presented as tables or grids, rubrics outline different performance levels for a particular skill, making it easier to evaluate students' progress and identify those needing additional support. For instance, a rubric for speaking and pronunciation can highlight varying degrees of mastery in this area (URL1).

For example, writing proficiency levels. To evaluate students' writing abilities, a rubric might include:

- Poor: Writes some words but frequently misspells others.

- Fair: Writes most words correctly but struggles to form complete sentences.

- Good: Writes full sentences with occasional errors.

- Excellent: Produces error-free sentences consistently.

Using rubrics, teachers can refine assessments by considering additional factors, such as punctuation accuracy or specific word types students struggle with (e.g., longer or complex words) (ibid).

b) offer flexible assessment methods

Traditional assessments like tests and worksheets may not accommodate the diverse ways students express their understanding. To address this, provide multiple options for demonstrating knowledge and skills (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

For example:

- Replace a multiple-choice test with a face-to-face Q&A session for students who struggle with written assessments.

- Allow students to choose between writing on the board or completing the same task at their desks to reduce anxiety while still demonstrating their learning.

By offering these choices, you cater to individual needs, reducing barriers to assessment and enabling all students to succeed (URL1).

c) questions to guide differentiation

When planning differentiated instruction, ask yourself:

- Do students have the same level of prior knowledge?
- Are reading and writing skills consistent across the class?
- What learning styles do my students exhibit?
- Are there behavioural issues that could impact learning?
- Do any students have disabilities or special needs?

d) be proactive, not reactive

Differentiation is most effective when implemented proactively. Anticipate scenarios where students may need varied approaches rather than waiting until challenges arise. Assess students' prior knowledge and skills before lesson planning to integrate differentiation strategies seamlessly into your teaching. This forward-thinking approach ensures all learners are supported from the outset. (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

Therefore, to effectively differentiate instruction, teachers must take several important steps: modify lesson plans to address the content, process, and product; consider the classroom environment as a key element of differentiation; pre-assess students to gauge their existing knowledge related to the upcoming content; group students based on their knowledge levels; provide materials aligned with students' interests; offer resources that reinforce students' potential; and tailor activities according to students' preferred learning styles, which are often categorized by multiple intelligences such as linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, kinesthetic, musical, naturalistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Gaitas et al., 2022). These strategies ensure that instruction is adapted to meet individual students' learning needs and preferences.

Tomlinson (2017) identifies three essential areas of the curriculum that should be linked: content (what learners will learn), process (how they will learn), and product (how they will demonstrate their understanding). Differentiated classroom strategies to support these areas include:

- Stations: Different points in the classroom where students engage with various tasks simultaneously.
- Complex Instruction: Small instructional groups engaged in intellectually challenging subjects to promote equal learning opportunities.
- Orbital Studies: Independent inquiry or discovery focused on an aspect of the curriculum.

- Centres: Learning areas that operate independently, typically based on student interests or subjects.

- Tiered Activities: Activities that maintain focus on the same learning goals but offer varying levels of difficulty, enabling learners with different needs to engage with the same core content (Reese, 2011).

Tomlinson (2017) also emphasizes the importance of the learning environment, which encompasses not only classroom routines, procedures, and physical layout but also the overall atmosphere among students and between students and teachers. These factors are critical when differentiating instruction (Gaitas et al., 2022).

Differentiated instruction can be conceptualized as a triangle of learning, with the teacher, content, and students as its vertices. The dynamics among these components are essential for sustaining the teaching and learning process. In an EFL context, understanding students' motivations for learning English is crucial for tailoring the design and teaching methods to suit their needs (Gregory & Chapman, 2013).

To address the challenges of a heterogeneous classroom, several teaching solutions can be implemented. These include diversifying topics, methods, and texts to accommodate different student interests, using visual aids to enhance engagement, employing a combination of mandatory and optional tasks to provide flexibility, using open-ended cues to foster critical thinking, and encouraging collaboration through peer teaching (Huszti, 2005).

2.2 Teacher's perceptions and beliefs about Differentiation

Esther Gheyssens, Júlia Griful-Freixenet, and Katrien Struyven (2023) aimed to explore differentiated instruction (DI) as a pedagogical model that fosters effective teaching in inclusive classrooms by addressing individual learning needs and maximizing learning opportunities. Their research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of differentiation (DI) as both a teaching practice and philosophy, focusing on how it is perceived and implemented by teachers. Two main objectives guided the study: first, exploring teachers' perceptions of DI, which led to the development of the DI-Quest model, and second, investigating how DI is implemented in classrooms. Four empirical studies were conducted with 1302 teachers in study 1 and 1522 teachers across studies 2, 3, and 4, using mixed methods. The results were compared with existing literature on DI, highlighting the significance of teachers' philosophical views, the need for DI to be seen and implemented as a pedagogical model, and the complexities involved in professional

development. The findings suggest that while DI holds promise for creating inclusive classrooms, its real-world application is more complex than theoretical models suggest (ibid.).

The DI-Quest model, developed by Coubergs et al. (2017), redefines differentiated instruction (DI) as a comprehensive pedagogical model rather than a collection of teaching strategies. Based on the DI-questionnaire, this model identifies factors influencing the adoption of DI and was inspired by Tomlinson's (2017) step-by-step DI framework. Tomlinson's model emphasizes differentiating content, process, product, and environment according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, supported by principles like respectful tasks, flexible grouping, and ongoing assessment (ibid.).

The DI-Quest model differs by categorizing teachers based on how frequently they use DI, identifying five factors grouped into three categories:

- Adaptive Teaching (key factor): Adjusting teaching to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles – considered the core of DI.

- DI as a Philosophy: Representing teachers' beliefs about inclusivity and the value of differentiation.

- Differentiated Strategies: Practical methods applied in classrooms.

This model highlights DI's dual nature as both a teaching practice and a mindset, with a focus on its holistic implementation in classrooms.
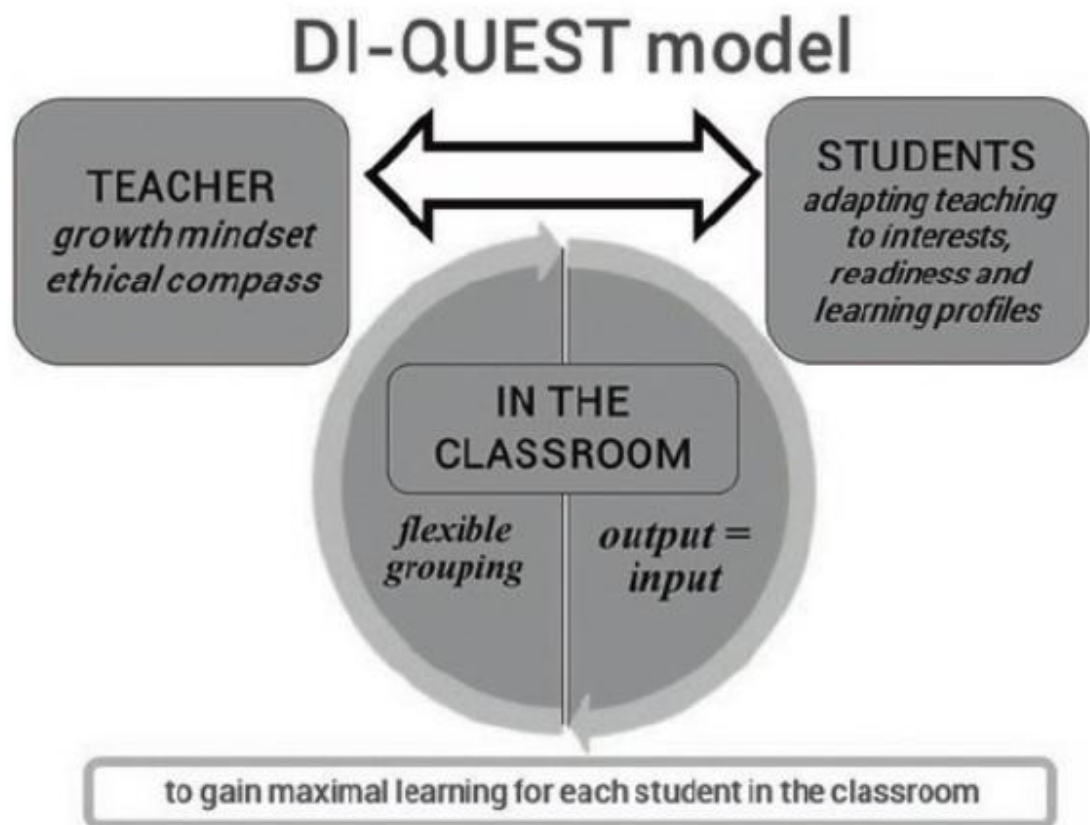

Figure 1: *The DI-Quest model* (Coubergs et al., 2017, p. 680)

Flexible grouping and feedback play pivotal roles in differentiated instruction. Flexible grouping, which alternates between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, helps students progress based on their abilities (in homogeneous groups) and learn through peer interaction (in heterogeneous groups). This variation ensures maximal learning opportunities for all students and is a strong predictor of adaptive teaching practices (ibid.).

The practice of "Output = Input" highlights the importance of using student outputs – such as task performance, classroom behaviour, and evaluations – as feedback. This feedback serves as input for both students' ongoing learning and teachers' instructional adjustments. Far from being the final step, assessment and feedback are integral to the teaching and learning process, positively influencing adaptive teaching (ibid.).

Studies also identified challenges to DI implementation, including limited teacher training, heavy workloads, large class sizes, and lack of administrative support. Hence, for teachers, differentiation can mean more work, but also more successful students. The question is how you approach it. If you apply a few strategies, you will easily find that by practising them you can really personalise the curriculum better (URL1).

Over recent years, teachers have faced numerous challenges in the classroom. One strategy for addressing low student performance is recognizing learner variability. Teachers are encouraged to adjust their expectations, as well as the content and activities, to suit the abilities and differences of their students. EFL teachers, in particular, consider the challenges of implementing differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms as one of the most significant obstacles (Naka, 2018). The greater the classroom diversity, the more preparation is needed. Pre-assessments should be conducted to gauge each student's readiness, interests, and learning characteristics (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

Several key challenges include student-to-teacher ratios, insufficient pre-service training for teachers, a lack of suitable resources for implementing differentiated instruction, poor student engagement, and a reliance on traditional instructional methods (Aldossari, 2018). Practical issues, such as insufficient time or resources, often prevent teachers from making the necessary changes to their classroom practices. Moreover, the additional preparation time required for implementing DI can be a significant barrier (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Widiati et al., 2023). Time limitations are a particular concern for DI, as meaningful learning cannot occur without ample time (Porta & Todd, 2022).

Consequently, many teachers feel that planning and instructional time are not sufficient for differentiation. When attempting to implement DI, the greatest challenges they face are a lack of time for planning and delivering instruction (Aftab, 2016). Due to time constraints, they are unable to incorporate differentiated instruction into their usual teaching routine, often resorting to

traditional methods and using only standard texts, as they are unable to introduce a variety of resources like jigsaws, graphic organizers, and diverse texts (Chien, 2012). This discrepancy in teacher roles may be explained by a theoretical justification: teachers may recognize the importance of monitoring and supporting students' learning but, due to practical challenges such as pressure to complete the course material, they may revert to more comfortable methods of instruction (Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019).

Teachers' ability to fully embrace DI is often hindered by their lack of familiarity with its core principles. This can prevent them from experiencing its potential benefits, leading to a negative perception of DI and a return to traditional teaching methods (ibid.). To effectively implement DI, teachers need to adjust their approach, recognizing and accommodating the variances in their classrooms. When teachers are aware of these differences, they must be committed to making continuous adjustments to their teaching to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to master the learning content, regardless of their individual differences. A dedicated English teacher must therefore be equipped with a range of teaching strategies to accommodate the diverse needs of their students (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

2.3 Challenges teachers face when implementing Differentiated Instruction

An inclusive classroom environment, facilitated by DI, fosters a productive learning atmosphere where students feel comfortable and valued. The teaching methods and curriculum used by EFL teachers contribute to both the development and inclusion of students (Celik, 2019). Implementing DI requires a shift in how inclusion is perceived, emphasizing student engagement and commitment to the lessons. It also encourages the teacher to take on the role of a facilitator rather than an authoritarian figure (ibid.).

In a similar vein, as cited in Dabr (2021) an MA student from the Menofiya University demonstrated the effectiveness of DI in improving EFL writing skills. In her study, ninety sophomore EFL students participated in a DI treatment, with significant improvements observed in their post-test scores. This illustrates that DI is particularly effective in enhancing the writing skills of EFL students. Furthermore, DI helps students improve their overall abilities by tailoring instruction to their individual learning preferences (Dabr, 2021).

Magableh and Abdullah (2020) examined the impact of DI on EFL students' reading comprehension. Their study, which involved two experimental and two control groups, showed that DI was effective in improving reading comprehension among Jordanian students in grades four and five. Students who experienced DI demonstrated notable progress in reading

comprehension, indicating an improvement in overall performance (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023).

Magableh and Abdullah (2020) further confirmed the positive effects of DI by studying its impact on English achievement among eighth-grade students in Irbid, Jordan. Their research showed that the experimental group, which was taught using DI, performed better in reducing classroom variation and fostering EFL learning (ibid.).

In conclusion, the findings from these studies suggest that differentiated teaching methods are beneficial for enhancing the learning experience of students from diverse backgrounds. Theoretical and practical implications indicate that DI can address students' interests and needs, enabling them to learn English more successfully (ibid.).

The positive outcomes are a result of the teacher's thoughtful selection of DI strategies, which help students feel more confident and comfortable in learning English according to their individual needs and preferences (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019).

Aldossari's study (2018) highlights several key challenges in implementing differentiated instruction, particularly institutional barriers such as inadequate teacher training and lack of resources. Time constraints and rigid course planning also discourage teachers from applying differentiated strategies, often leading them to revert to traditional methods under pressure (ibid.).

The findings suggest that without sufficient support and professional development, the practical use of differentiated instruction remains limited despite its recognized benefits (ibid., p. 78).

1) Practical Challenges in the Classroom

Numerous studies have highlighted the advantages of using differentiated instruction (DI) in EFL classrooms. For instance, Kotob and Abadi (2019) presented a study about the influence of differentiated instruction on academic achievement of students in mixed-ability classrooms. Mixed-ability or heterogeneous classes comprise students with varying levels of proficiency, strengths, and learning preferences. As no two learners are identical, truly homogeneous classes do not exist. Such diversity is present in all schools, reflecting students' differing backgrounds and prior knowledge (ibid., p. 12).

Specifically, the study investigates how the application of differentiated instruction affects the academic achievement of both low and high-achievers. It also evaluates the strategies employed by the teacher to implement differentiated instruction and the extent to which students, especially low-achievers, benefit from this approach, considering the teacher's time and effort in the process. The study involved 20 students from one intact English class, with 10 low-achievers and 10 high-achievers. It used a pre-test and post-test design to assess the academic performance of these students (ibid., p. 15).

The findings of the study reveal the following:

• Low-Achievers: There was a significant improvement in the academic scores of low-achievers from pre-test to post-test, highlighting the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in supporting their academic progress.

• High-Achievers: For high-achievers, the scores remained relatively stable between the pre-test and post-test, indicating that differentiated instruction did not significantly alter their academic performance (ibid., p. 21).

Şaban and Atay (2023) investigated the perceptions of Turkish higher education EFL instructors regarding DI. The aim of this study was to explore the practices of differentiated instruction (DI) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in higher education, specifically within a university English preparatory program in Turkey. The study sought to determine how instructors apply Tomlinson's (2017) framework of differentiation, which involves adapting content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. They collected the data of 51 instructors using a questionnaire adapted from Santangelo and Tomlinson (Şaban & Atay, 2023).

Through the research, instructors provided their responses, and the following conclusions were drawn: Instructors tended to focus more on students' readiness levels rather than their interests or learning profiles when differentiating instruction. The most common approach among instructors was to differentiate the learning environment, more so than content, process, or product (ibid.).

According to this study, the most common differentiation strategies are:

• Providing supplemental materials for slow learners.

• Using a variety of grouping formats.

• Supporting weak students to complete assignments.

This study has reported, that the least common differentiation strategies are:

• Offering multiple text options for students.

• Grouping students based on their interests.

• Allowing students to produce tasks in different forms.

2) Institutional and structural barriers

The study of Kotob and Abadi (2019) reveals a significant discrepancy between the expectations placed on teachers by educational stakeholders and the institutional support provided to meet those expectations. While there is a clear demand from stakeholders for the implementation of differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms, teachers frequently report a lack of adequate resources and structural support necessary for effective execution. This misalignment suggests that institutional frameworks often fail to equip educators with the tools and conditions

required for differentiation, thereby presenting a structural barrier to its consistent and meaningful application.

3) Time constraints and planning limitations

The above-mentioned research highlights time constraints and planning limitations as critical barriers to the effective implementation of differentiated instruction. Although teachers demonstrated a positive disposition toward the approach and acknowledged its value, the lack of sufficient time for lesson preparation and individualised planning significantly hindered its practical application. This finding underscores that even when motivation and institutional support are present, the absence of dedicated time remains a central obstacle to adopting differentiated strategies in mixed-ability classrooms.

4) Reverting to traditional teaching under pressure

Ibrahim Magableh and Amelia Abdullah (2020) made a study, that aimed to investigate the effect of differentiated instruction (DI) on students' learning outcomes in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and to explore the challenges teachers face when implementing DI. Specifically, it sought to compare the effectiveness of DI strategies with traditional teaching methods.

The study found that the experimental group, which received DI, showed statistically significant improvement in their EFL achievement compared to the control group, which was taught using traditional, one-size-fits-all methods. The experimental group utilized DI strategies such as flexible grouping, tiered assignments, and tiered instruction across content, process, and product areas.

Meanwhile, teachers reported several challenges to implementing DI effectively. These challenges included:

- Planning for differentiated activities: teachers found it time-consuming and difficult to plan differentiated lessons.

- Lack of resources: there was a shortage of materials and resources to support DI.

- Lack of administrative support: teachers faced difficulties due to insufficient support from school administrations.

In summary, we can say that various studies have highlighted the advantages of differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. This approach has been shown to foster intellectual development, increase interest in the subject, enhance comprehension of key concepts, and support greater overall student progress. For instance, Kotob and Abadi (2019) reported a significant improvement in the academic performance of students previously identified as low-achievers when differentiated instruction was implemented. Similarly, Magableh and Abdullah (2020) demonstrated that differentiated instruction is an effective strategy for managing classes with diverse skill levels.

Despite these benefits, some researchers have pointed out challenges in implementing differentiated instruction effectively. These include practical difficulties such as time constraints, limited resources, and the complexity of adapting to diverse learner needs (Aftab, 2016; Naka, 2018).

Gheyssens, Griful-Freixenet, and Struyven (2023) identified several challenges in implementing differentiated instruction (DI) from the teachers' perspective. Key obstacles include limited teacher training, large class sizes, heavy workloads, and insufficient administrative support. Many teachers also face time constraints, which prevent them from effectively planning and delivering differentiated lessons. As a result, they often revert to traditional methods due to the lack of time and resources for more diverse teaching strategies. Additionally, teachers' unfamiliarity with DI's core principles can lead to negative perceptions and hinder the model's full implementation.

PART III.

RESEARCH ON DIFFERENTIATION IN THE CONTEXT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN TRANSCARPATHIA

The primary object of this research is to explore how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Transcarpathia understand and apply differentiation in their teaching practice. Based on their professional experience, the study investigates how these educators perceive the concept of differentiation and how they adapt their methods to meet the diverse needs of learners in the region.

The research sought to determine the extent of awareness and understanding of differentiated instruction. Another key area of inquiry was the actual classroom implementation of differentiation, including which strategies (such as adapting content, process, product, or learning environment) teachers most frequently employ.

A central focus of the study was to uncover both the opportunities and challenges that Transcarpathian EFL teachers associate with differentiation in practice. On the one hand, the research aimed to highlight the benefits teachers observe, such as improved student engagement, enhanced learner outcomes, or a more inclusive classroom environment; on the other hand, it also examined the practical difficulties they face, including limited time, insufficient training, lack of resources and the complexity of planning for mixed-ability groups. Furthermore, special attention was given to the reasons for differentiation and the methods used while differentiating. The research examined whether teachers tend to differentiate more for high-achievers, students with special educational needs, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those in multilingual settings.

Finally, the study investigated how teachers' beliefs about the feasibility and effectiveness of differentiation affect their willingness to apply it consistently in their everyday teaching. Is it true, that differentiation is widely recognized and considered as a valuable pedagogical approach among Transcarpathian EFL teachers, but its practical application is influenced by both contextual challenges and individual teaching profiles?

3.1 Methodology

The theme of the current study is research of differentiation in the context of English language teaching in Transcarpathia. For this study, it is of interest to investigate the teachers' opinion on the practice of differentiation with its opportunities and challenges.

Since the research aimed to explore the experiences of EFL teachers in Transcarpathia regarding differentiation, the use of a survey was the most appropriate method. However, as well-formulated questions are essential for designing an effective questionnaire, three interviews with different Transcarpathian English teachers (Interviewees 1, 2, 3) were first conducted to address key issues identified in the literature and to provide subjective insights. The questions of the interviews are included in the Appendices (see Appendix 1).

The insight gathered from these discussions helped narrow the focus of the study. During the interviews, subjective opinions were obtained, which raised further questions about whether what was heard during the interviews was representative of the wider community. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how EFL teachers in the region implement differentiation strategies, it was necessary to involve a larger number of participants. Today, there is no more efficient way to achieve this than through online questionnaires, so this method was considered appropriate for the research to be carried out (see Appendix 2). It was used to gather qualitative data by asking for more in-depth responses, which allowed the teacher's views to be collected.

3.1.1   Planning the study

The research idea emerged from informal discussions with local teachers, which revealed varying opinions and experiences regarding differentiation. These early conversations and the pedagogical practice highlighted that while some educators found differentiation to be a useful and necessary practice, others expressed uncertainty or hesitation about its feasibility in real classroom settings.

This topic has also been a central focus of my academic interest throughout my higher education studies. For the past three years, I have continuously explored Differentiation and DI, especially in the context of EFL teaching. I chose to further investigate this theme in my final thesis, aiming to understand how EFL teachers in Transcarpathia perceive and implement differentiation and what factors shape their approaches.

After immersing myself in the relevant literature, a general trend began to emerge, which sparked my curiosity as to whether the same tendencies could be observed among teachers in Transcarpathia as well. Based on initial reflections and previous project work, the research questions were gradually narrowed down to explore specific aspects, such as teachers' awareness, actual practices, perceived benefits and challenges, and future opportunities. However, it was not feasible to observe every teacher's lesson, I asked them to provide honest accounts of their practices and share insights into their specific situation and methods. The study uses qualitative data collected through interviews and a questionnaire designed around these key focus areas.

3.1.2 Research instruments

The study was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, three semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the three different teachers mentioned before. The interviews were informal yet guided by open-ended questions on differentiation, allowing the participants to share their understanding, experiences, and practical examples. The text of the interviews is included in the Appendices (see Appendix 3). Notes were taken during the interviews and later analysed to identify interesting and recurring themes.

In the second phase, a questionnaire was developed based on the themes from the themes from the interviews. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the research and gave implicit consent by completing the questionnaire. They were instructed to answer truthfully based on their personal teaching experience.

The questionnaire includes both closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing for a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. Instead of the typical and traditional 5-point Likert scale, a 4-point scale was used for the multiple-choice questions (e.g., To what extent do you agree with the following statement?) to obtain more accurate data and to avoid neutral or non-committal responses. The questionnaire was the primary tool for data collection, aiming to gather responses from a larger group of EFL teachers to validate and expand on themes identified in the interviews. The main propositions of the questionnaire are:

- General Information (about the teaching experience of the teacher)
- Understanding Differentiation
- Opportunities in Differentiation
- Methods and Strategies
- Challenges of Differentiation
- Future Opportunities
- Insights from Educators not currently practicing Differentiation (If the teacher does not currently use differentiation actively)

3.1.3 Participants

For the research, the initial phase involved three Transcarpathian EFL teacher who were selected through purposeful sampling based on their availability and relevance to the research topic. These

teachers differed in age, teaching experience, and the type of institution where they teach, ensuring diverse perspectives.

Interviewee 1 has been teaching young learners in primary school from 2013 to 2017, and since 2017 has been teaching teenagers at levels ranging from A1 to B2, so overall has over 12 years of experience. Interviewee 2 has over 30 years of experience and has been working in a secondary school since 2006. Interviewee 3 has one year of experience in kindergarten and two years of experience in primary school.

Following the interviews, the questionnaire was distributed to a broader group of English language teachers working in Transcarpathia. A total of 31 teachers completed the questionnaire. The participants were invited via social media platforms and personal networks. All respondents were currently or previously involved in teaching English as a foreign language in the region.

Demographic details collected in the questionnaire include years of teaching experience, age groups, and proficiency levels taught. This demographic information was used to analyse how teaching context and experience may influence the understanding and practice of differentiation. Analysis of the responses revealed that the majority of participants (51,6%, 16 respondents) had been teaching English for less than five years. A smaller but notable portion (29%, 9 respondents) reported over 21 years of teaching experience. Teachers with mid-range experience formed a smaller segment: 12,9% (4 respondents) had 5-10 years of experience, and only 6.5% (2 respondents) reported teaching for 11-20 years. This distribution indicates that the sample is skewed toward less experienced teachers. As such, the results should primarily reflect the perspectives of those at the early stages of their teaching careers, because more than half of the respondents are relatively new to the profession, possessing recent theoretical knowledge but more limited practical experience. Teachers who are at the beginning of their careers are often more enthusiastic and open to change, which makes their perspectives particularly valuable in this context. Moreover, their insights can be meaningfully compared with those of the more experienced respondents, who have over six years of teaching practice.

The majority of respondents reported teaching or having taught lower secondary students aged 11-14 (71%) and upper secondary students aged 15-18 (61%). A substantial proportion (67%) also indicated experience with teaching primary school children aged 6-10. In contrast, teaching adults was less common, with only 29% of respondents, so 9 teachers had experience in this area.

Regarding language proficiency levels, the most frequently taught levels were A2 (90,3%) and A1 (80,6%), followed by intermediate levels B1-B2 (74,2%). Instruction at higher proficiency levels (C1-C2) was relatively rare, reported by only 12,9% of the respondents.

These findings suggest that the participants primarily work in the public sector, with a strong focus on primary and secondary school learners. Consequently, the results predominantly reflect classroom practices and challenges within the general education system.

3.1.4   Procedures of the research

The research was carried out in two main phases: a preliminary qualitative phase involving structured interviews between 25 and 29 March, followed by a broader data collection phase beginning on 3 April through the distribution of a questionnaire. The overall study took place between 25 March and 10 May.

In the first phase, the author of this study contacted five EFL teachers working in various educational settings in Transcarpathia, three of whom agreed to participate in an interview. The discussions were conducted via online video conferencing platform Google Meet. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted in the participants' native language, Hungarian, to encourage honest responses and to maximize comfort while fostering the atmosphere of an informal conversation. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency while allowing for open discussions. The interview questions focused on the teacher's understanding of differentiation, their practical experiences, the perceived benefit and challenges, the opportunities, and their views on applying differentiation in EFL classrooms. The participants were informed of the research purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Permission was obtained to make audio recordings of the interviews, from which key extracts were later transcribed. In each case, consent was also granted to take notes during the discussions. The interview transcripts were later analyzed to identify key themes that would inform the development of the questionnaire.

In the second phase, the insights gathered from the interviews were used to construct an online questionnaire, which served as the primary data collection instrument for the broader teacher population. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions and was made available in Hungarian and Ukrainian to ensure clarity and encourage honest responses. The link to the Google Forms questionnaire was distributed via relevant social media platforms and through personal contacts.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were provided with a brief introduction explaining the purpose of the research, the estimated time required to complete the form (approximately 15-20), and the assurance of anonymity and voluntary participation. By proceeding with the questionnaire, participants provided implicit consent. No personally identifiable data were

collected. Participants were instructed to answer all the questions honestly and based solely on their own teaching experience and opinions.

The data from both phases were systematically collected and organized for further analysis, Interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were analyzed thematically, with particular attention to recurring patterns and contradictions between participants' beliefs and practices. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data provided a comprehensive view of how differentiation is applied by EFL teachers in Transcarpathia.

The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions of various types, organized into 6 main sections plus an additional, conditional section. Questions 2.4, 6.1, and the conditional section 3.1 included open-ended questions, allowing respondents to share their personal experiences in their own words. Questions 3.3, 4.3, and 5.2 assessed teachers' level of agreement with 3, 4, and 6 statements, respectively, using a four-point scale. These statements were directly derived from the interviews conducted in the initial phase of the research and also strongly influenced the formulation of the other survey questions.

The final, conditional section was completed only by those respondents who were not currently applying differentiation in their teaching practice. This group consisted of seven individuals: one of them reported not using differentiation, because they considered it unfeasible, while the remaining six indicated that they did not currently use it but would like to begin doing so. Among these seven respondents, three stated that they had not yet become familiar with the concept of differentiation.

The interview was conducted in Hungarian, while the questionnaire was available in both Hungarian and Ukrainian. The open-ended responses have been translated by the author of this study.

3.2 Findings

The survey provided answers to a number of questions concerning teaching English as a foreign language in schools with Hungarian (and Ukrainian) as the language of instruction. This section presents the main findings of the study based on data collected through interviews and questionnaires with EFL teachers in Transcarpathia. The results offer insight into how familiar teachers are with the concept of differentiation, how they apply it in practice, and what obstacles they face. The findings are organized thematically according to the main research questions guiding the study.

3.2.1 Understanding differentiation

All respondents had at least heard of differentiated instruction, with only three participants (9,7%) – all of whom had less than five years of teaching experience – reporting no knowledge of the concept. The majority (45,2%) encountered it briefly during professional development sessions, while 32,2% reported having independently sought information on the topic, suggesting a proactive interest. A smaller proportion (12,9%) received training in differentiation. In other words, most teachers are familiar with the concept of differentiation and differentiated instruction to some extent, however, for many this knowledge appears to be rather superficial, suggesting the need for more in-depth training in this area.

The questionnaire is included Figure 2. The accompanying prompt asked teachers what came to their mind when viewing the image – whether it evoked thoughts of equal rights and treatment, or whether they found it nonsensical, as illustrated by the widely cited saying and often argued in educational discourse, assessing all students by the same standard may disadvantage those whose strengths lie elsewhere, leading them to internalize a sense of inadequacy. The majority of teachers (77,4%) indicated that the image reflected the idea that every individual is a genius in their own way, while 22,6% associated it with the notion of equal opportunity.
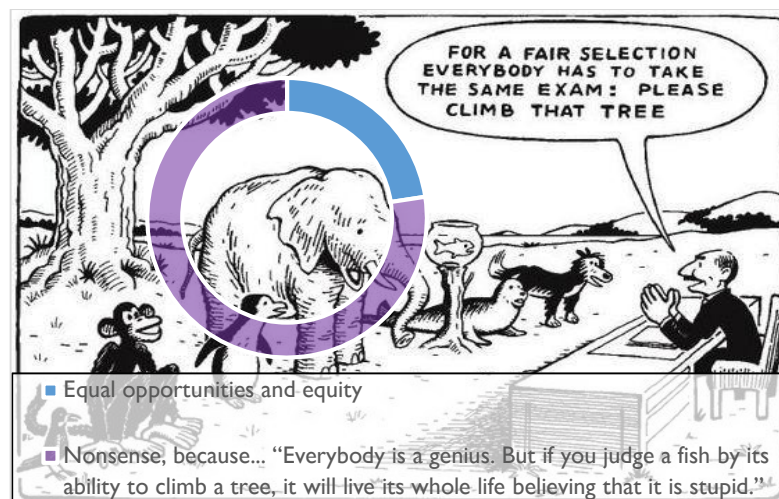
Figure 2: *Associations of the image about The Education System: "Now Climb That Tree"*
(URL 3; Own editing, based on the anonymous questionnaire respondents)

In response to the question regarding how their perception of differentiation has changed over the years, 61,3% of the respondents reported a shift in a positive direction. This group included teachers across all levels of experience, ranging from those with less than five years to those with more than 21 years of teaching practice. Another 29% stated that their perception had

not changed significantly. A smaller proportion, 9;7% (three respondents) reported a change in a negative direction, primarily due to the perceived difficulty of implementing differentiation in practice. Among them, one teacher with more than 21 years of experience admitted that he/she no longer actively uses DI, as he/she considers it unfeasible to apply.

The following question aimed to assess teachers' perceptions of how differentiated instruction differs from uniform teaching methods. Respondents were allowed to select multiple options. A total of 23 teachers indicated that differentiation requires more planning and preparation; according to 21 teachers, it provides students with learning pathways that are better suited to their individual needs; twenty respondents noted that it offers learners more opportunities, while 9 teachers selected the option suggesting that it ensures more effective learning trajectories for all students.

To the question of whether they apply differentiation, the majority of the teachers (77,4%) do incorporate it to some extent – either regularly or occasionally. Specifically, 54,8% of the respondents reported using differentiation, though not consistently in every lesson, while only 22,6% claimed to apply it in all lessons. A noteworthy 19,4% stated that they do not currently differentiate, but would like to begin doing so, indicating a potential openness toward adopting the practice, possibly limited by different factors such as training, resources, or confidence. Only a small minority (3,2%) expressed that they do not use differentiation and consider it unfeasible, highlighting that for some teachers, perceived barriers can significantly hinder implementation. The evaluation of their responses can be found in section 3.2.3.

The next question invited participants to define their personal understanding of differentiation within their own teaching practice. A few answers are gathered in Table 2.

How would you define differentiation in your own teaching practice?
In my teaching practice, differentiation means adapting instruction to students' individual abilities, pace, and needs. This can be implemented through varied tasks, supplementary materials, group work, or differentiated prompts, in order to ensure that every student can experience success.
Differentiation is a very effective tool in theory, but in order to apply it, I would need more time and resources.
Preparing for lessons takes much more time if I want to differentiate. Sometimes the class becomes noisier as a result, but it is beneficial because everyone can develop at their own level. It is an opportunity, but also a major challenge.

I try to adapt to students' needs by using tasks and presentations that capture their attention and by addressing the linguistic diversity in the classroom. However, due to the large differences in students' proficiency levels, differentiation is difficult to apply.
Every child is unique, with individual talents. We must find the best approach for each student.
When selecting texts, I try to choose topics that I know interest the student and are also appropriate for their level.
As a private tutor, I select tasks for each student based on their individual level and interests. I personalize reading comprehension tasks and visual aids. Since I work with students individually rather than in groups, I can give them my undivided attention. I adapt to their learning styles – some respond best to visual or auditory methods, while others prefer to link learning to physical activity. I can also tailor motivational strategies to each student.

Table 2. *Conceptualizations of differentiation in Transcarpathian EFL teachers' reflections*
(Own editing, based on the anonymous questionnaire respondents)

3.2.2 *Insights from educators not currently practicing differentiation*

If the teacher does not currently use differentiation actively, he/she has viewed a different section and responded to other questions. The evaluation of these responses can be found in this chapter.

To the question of whether they had ever tried differentiation, and if so, why they stopped using it, the answers among the 7 respondents varied. Three had never tried differentiation, while others indicated that they had used it but faced challenges that led to reduced use. Reasons for stopping included lack of time and difficulty managing differentiation in large groups of students.

71,4% of respondents were certain that differentiation would be effective if all necessary conditions were in place, while 28,6% were somewhat less certain but still expressed confidence by selecting the Rather Yes option.

The following question asked the participants what learner-, teacher-, or non-human-related factors hinder the application of differentiation, and respondents identified several barriers. 57,1% was the most frequently mentioned lack of time, followed by large class sizes (28,6%) and insufficient time allocated within the curriculum (14,3%). Interestingly, administrative burdens and rigid textbooks were not commonly reported obstacles. This indicates that time constraints and class management issues are the primary practical challenges to differentiation.

The vast majority of respondents (85,7%) were open to learning from peers, indicating a willingness to engage in collaborative professional development and peer observation as a pathway to improve their own differentiation practices.

The most requested forms of support included printed collections of practical ideas (57,1%); experience exchange during further training with concrete case discussions (85,7%); textbooks that allow for multiple learning pathways (42,9%); funding for study visits to observe language in practice (14,3%); and forums for sharing and discussing classroom experiences with colleagues (14,3%). For this question, some teachers had selected more than one answer.

The responses collectively highlight that while there is recognition of differentiation's potential benefits, significant practical barriers, particularly time constraints, and large class sizes, limit active and consistent use. However, teachers show openness to professional collaboration and desire more practical resources and training to enhance their differentiation skills. These findings suggest that targeted support in the form of time management strategies, peer learning opportunities, and adaptable instructional materials could facilitate broader adoption of differentiation in classrooms.

3.2.3   Opportunities in differentiation

Overall, the response to the questionnaire regarding the use of differentiated instruction, points to a generally positive attitude toward differentiation among Transcarpathian EFL teachers, with room for growth in consistent application and support structures.

The majority of respondents (79,2%) reported a noticeable improvement in students' academic performance as a result of differentiation, while 20,8% observed no significant change. Importantly, none indicated any decline in academic outcomes.

Moreover, all participants agreed – either strongly or to some extent – that students learn more effectively when content is tailored to their interests reinforcing the motivational benefits of personalized learning.

A similarly high level of agreement was found regarding the effectiveness of ability-based groupings, with 20 participants strongly and 4 somewhat agreeing that this approach helps bridge learning gaps. These findings suggest that DI, particularly when it aligns with learners' interests and proficiency levels, is seen as a key driver of engagement and academic success.

The following question consisted of three statements and teachers were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a scale from 1 to 4 (where 4 means Strongly agree, 3 – Mostly agree, 2 – Mostly disagree and 1 equals Strongly disagree). The statements are based on the interviews

from the first phase of this study. The first statement was: My students are open and respond positively to differentiation (Interviewee 3). The second statement was: Children learn much better when I bring them something they like or are interested in (Interviewee 2). The third statement was: Grouping students by proficiency (even on an institutional level) helps bridge learning gaps, as it's hard to teach both A1 and B1 students in the same group (Interviewee 1).
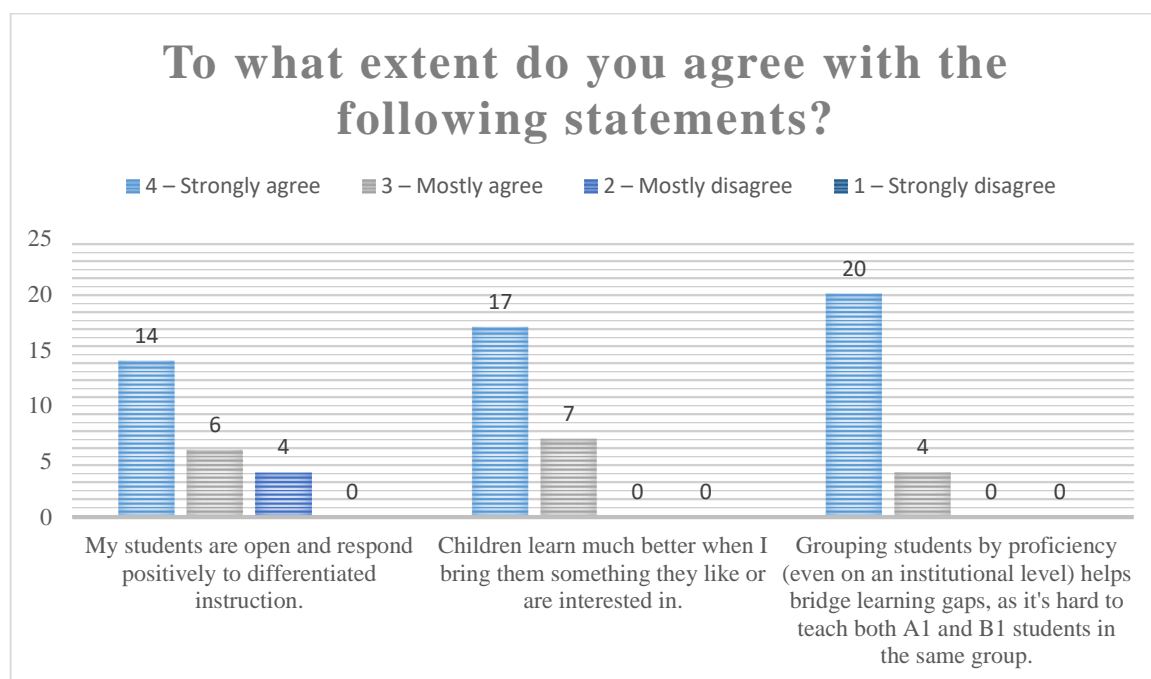

Figure 3: *Transcarpathian EFL teachers' perceptions of student engagement and differentiation strategies* (Own editing, based on the anonymous questionnaire respondents)

In Figure 3. it is observable that the first statement received a predominantly positive response, as the teachers generally perceive students as receptive to tailored approaches. The second statement's result suggests that most of the teachers recognize the motivational power of interest-based content, reinforcing the idea that learner engagement is heightened when tasks are relevant or enjoyable. This supports previous open-ended responses, where teachers mentioned selecting materials based on students' interests and preferences. The third statement received the strongest consensus among responses. This result indicates that teachers overwhelmingly view grouping as a practical and necessary strategy for addressing heterogeneity in EFL classrooms. The statement likely resonated with the challenges in teaching mixed-ability groups mentioned earlier.

3.2.4 *Methods and strategies of differentiation*

The data collected in this section reveals the most frequently used strategies of the respondents in their teaching practice. Content and process differentiation were both selected by 79,2% of respondents, making them the dominant strategies used in Transcarpathian EFL teaching practices. Product differentiation (58,3%) and learning environment differentiation (45,8%) were used less frequently but still significantly. Notably, product and environment differentiation require more logistical planning, which may explain their lower rates of use, especially in larger or resource-limited classes. An important observation is that none of the strategies were selected by fewer than 45,8% of participants, suggesting a general openness among teachers to implement various forms of differentiation, even if some are used more routinely than others.
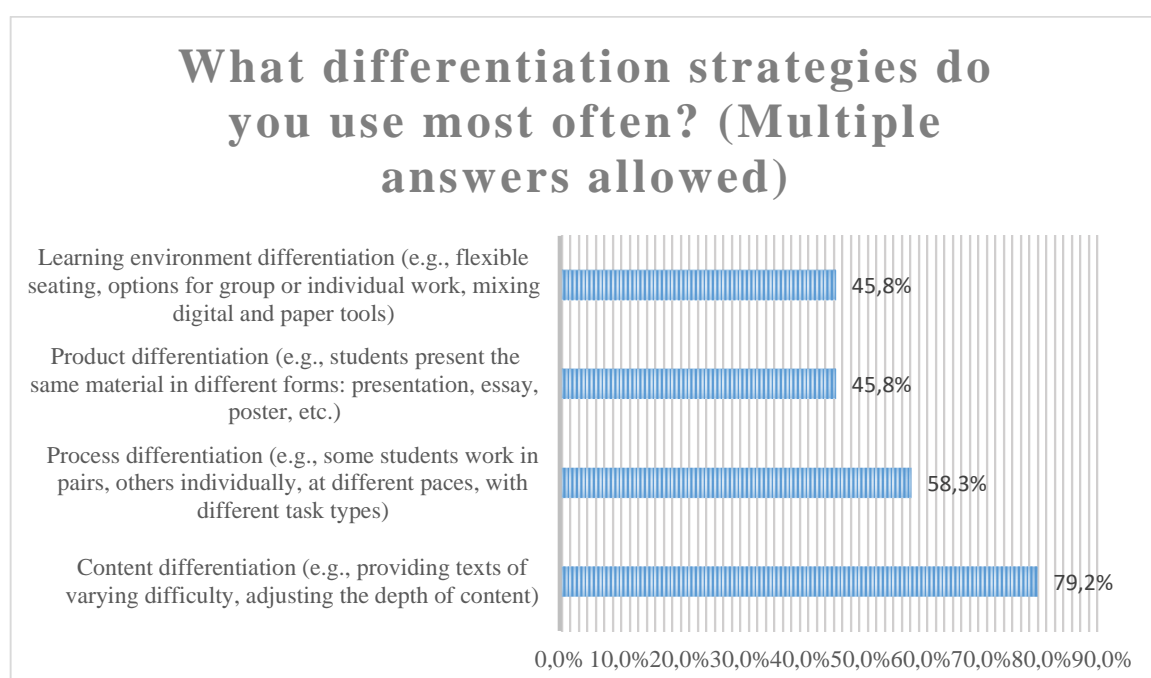
Figure 4: *The most used differentiation strategies by Transcarpathian EFL teachers* (Own editing, based on the anonymous questionnaire respondents)

The responses to the next question regarding the frequency of using some form of differentiation in teaching revealed an almost even distribution across three categories. Of the 24 respondents, 37,5% reported applying differentiation in every lesson, 29,2% indicated its use in every second lesson and 33,3% stated they implemented it once or twice a month. Notably, none of the participants reported using it less frequently than the options mentioned earlier.

The following question consisted of four statements and teachers were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a scale from 1 to 4 (where 4 means Strongly agree, and 1 equals Strongly disagree). The statements are based on the interviews from the first phase of this study.

Statement 1.: Differentiation is harder in primary classes than with older students (Interviewee 3).

Statement 2.: If we do pair or group work in class, it's better to mix stronger and weaker students instead of forming same-level groups (Interviewee 1).

Statement 3.: For weaker students, the more interactive, fun, or even humorous a lesson is, the better they retain what they learned (Interviewee 3).

Statement 4.: I have had classes where, due to students' different native languages, I had to prepare in more than one language (e.g., in both Ukrainian and Hungarian for grammar explanations or questions) (Interviewee 1).
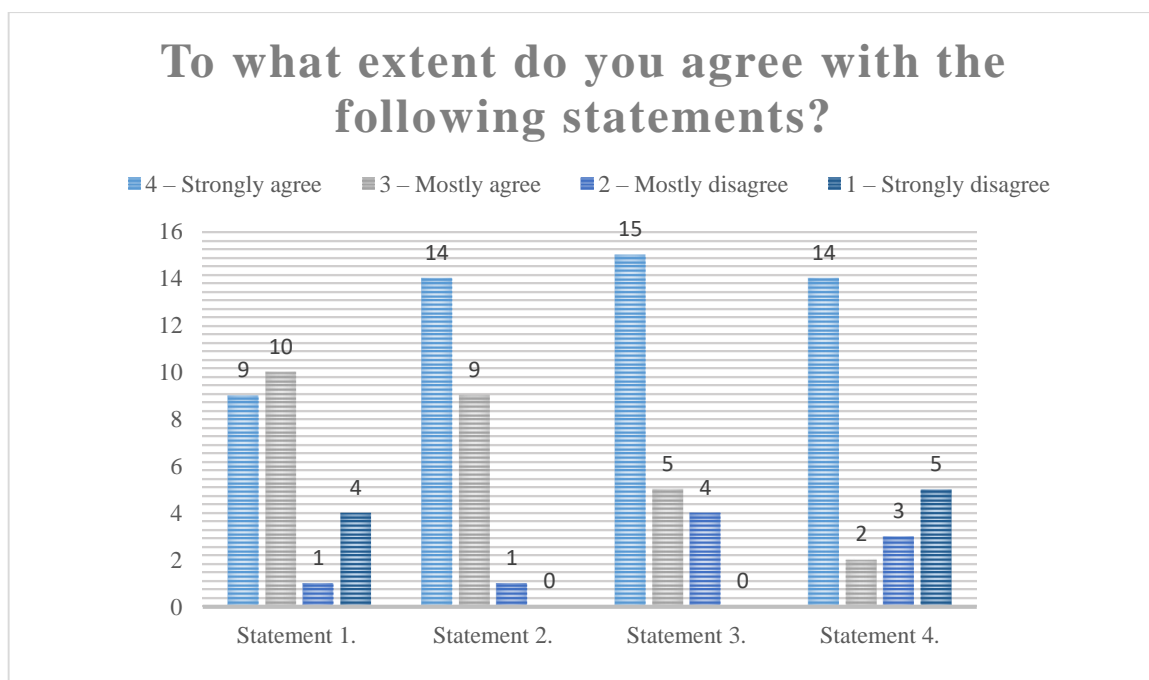
Figure 5: *Transcarpathian EFL teachers' perceptions of Differentiation in Multilingual and Mixed-ability Classrooms* (Own editing, based on the anonymous questionnaire respondents)

Figure 5 illustrates Transcarpathian EFL teachers' responses to four statements concerning differentiation in multilingual and mixed-ability classrooms, using a 4-point scale.

On Statement 1. responses were somewhat divided. While nine teachers strongly agreed and ten mostly agreed, a notable minority of four teachers strongly- and one mostly disagreed. This suggests that while many educators perceive differentiation as more challenging in younger age groups – likely due to classroom management factors – others may find it equally or even less

demanding compared to working with older students. This variation may stem from differences in teacher experience, training, or class composition.

The strongest consensus emerged around the second statement, with only one selecting the Mostly Disagree option, but the others mostly- or strongly agreed. This suggests a broad endorsement of heterogeneous grouping, aligning with the above-mentioned most frequent differentiation strategies.

Statement 3. also received widespread agreement, indicating that teachers recognize the positive role of engaging, emotionally resonant teaching methods – especially for learners with lower proficiency. However, five teachers showed less support, indicating that while valued, such strategies may not be universally effective.

On Statement 4. the responses varied, with 14 teachers strongly agreeing, but 5 respondents expressing disagreement (2 mostly disagree, 3 strongly disagree). The high number of strong agreements suggests that multilingual differentiation is a relevant and frequent reality for many EFL teachers in Transcarpathia. The responses may reflect the school demographics, but the need for multilingual differentiation is only likely to increase in the future due to demographic changes in the region.

The following two questions addressed the underlying reasons for applying differentiation, specifically the diverse student-related situations that justify its implementation. First, the findings of the question about teacher awareness of potential special educational needs (SEN) or learning difficulties were the following: 50% of the respondents indicated they had suspected learning difficulties or SEN; 37,5% reported observing behavioural signs that could suggest such challenges; only 12,5% stated they had not yet encountered such situations. An overwhelming 87,5% of respondents have at some point suspected that a student may have learning difficulties or SEN. This indicates a high level of awareness regarding diverse learning needs, even in the absence of formal assessments. It may also reflect a lack of available resources or limited access to professional diagnostic services in the region. Based on the following question, teachers most frequently apply differentiation when facing learning difficulties (79,2%), which aligns with the last question. However, there is a noticeable drop in differentiation applied for formally recognized SEN (29,2%), possibly due to the lack of official diagnoses or specific training and support for SEN interventions. Differentiation for high-performing students (45,8%) and for socioeconomically disadvantaged students (37,5%) is also practiced, but less consistently. This suggests that while differentiation is primarily viewed as a remedial strategy, there is still room for expanding its use as a tool for supporting both ends of the ability spectrum (see Figure 6.).

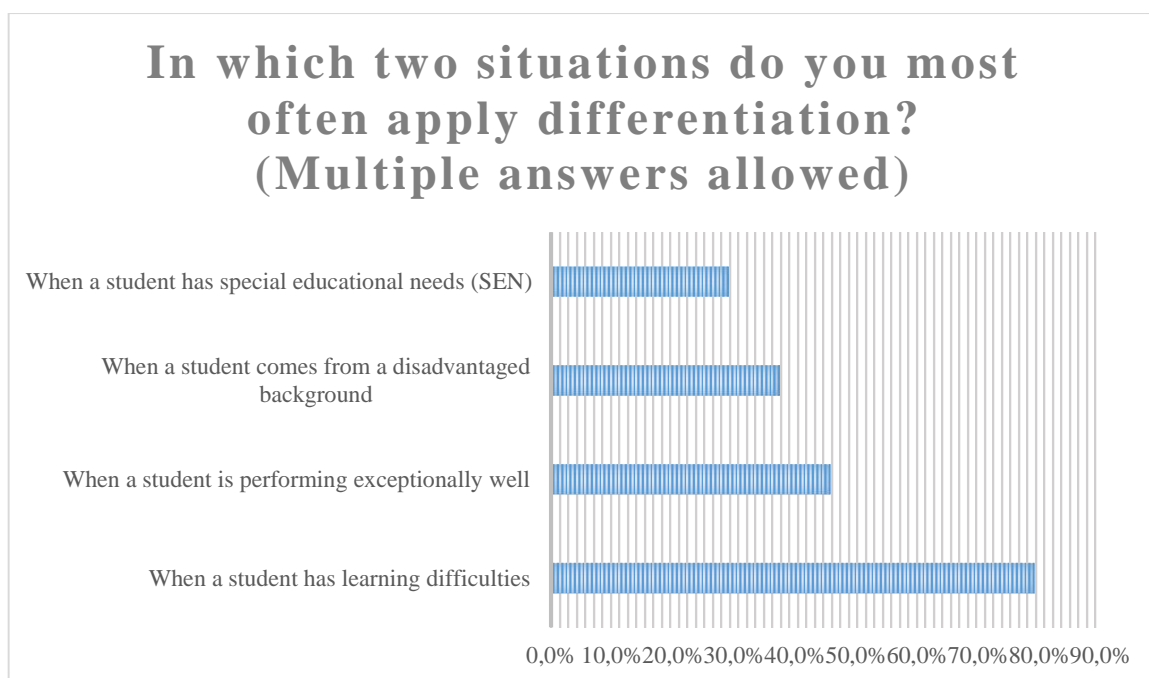**Figure 6:** *The most frequent situations where Transcarpathian EFL teachers use Differentiation* (Own editing, based on the anonymous questionnaire respondents)

3.2.5 Challenges of differentiation

While teachers generally expressed positive attitudes towards differentiation, several challenges were identified. Key systemic obstacles included lack of time, cited by 79,2% of respondents identifying it as one of the top three obstacles. This finding is consistent with existing literature, which frequently highlights time constraints as a major barrier to planning and executing differentiated instruction effectively. The second most commonly cited challenge is large class sizes (62,5%), which often limits the teacher's ability to tailor instruction to individual needs and monitor student progress closely. Lack of resources or tools was selected by 41,7% of respondents, indicating that beyond time and space, teachers also feel underequipped to deliver differentiated tasks or activities, whether due to insufficient materials, technology, or support. Interestingly, only 29,2% of teachers selected managing groups with heterogeneous ability levels as one of the greatest challenges. While this is traditionally seen as a core reason why differentiation is necessary, its lower ranking here may suggest that teachers are either accustomed to mixed-ability teaching or see it as less problematic than structural issues like time and class size. Finally, one of the respondents added discipline issues to the options, so 4,2% of the participants suggesting that behaviour management can also be a barrier to differentiation.

In the following question, teachers were presented with six statements and asked to indicate their level of agreement on a four-point scale (where 4 indicated Strongly agree and 1 indicated Strongly disagree). These statements were derived from insights shared during the interview phase of the research. The items addressed various challenges and perceptions related to differentiation, and are the following:

Statement 1.: Differentiation sounds nice on paper, but it's very hard to implement in practice.

Statement 2.: Differentiation is discussed in training sessions, but we don't receive many practical tips.

Statement 3.: There have been instances when my students (or their parents) perceived differentiation as unfair.

Statement 4.: There were cases when I suspected a student had learning difficulties, so I asked them to complete a task in a different way (e.g., orally instead of in writing).

Statement 5.: In my experience, many students (or their parents) perceive the implementation of differentiation as unfair. They feel they have to work more or receive harder tasks when I assign them based on ability and they are more advanced.

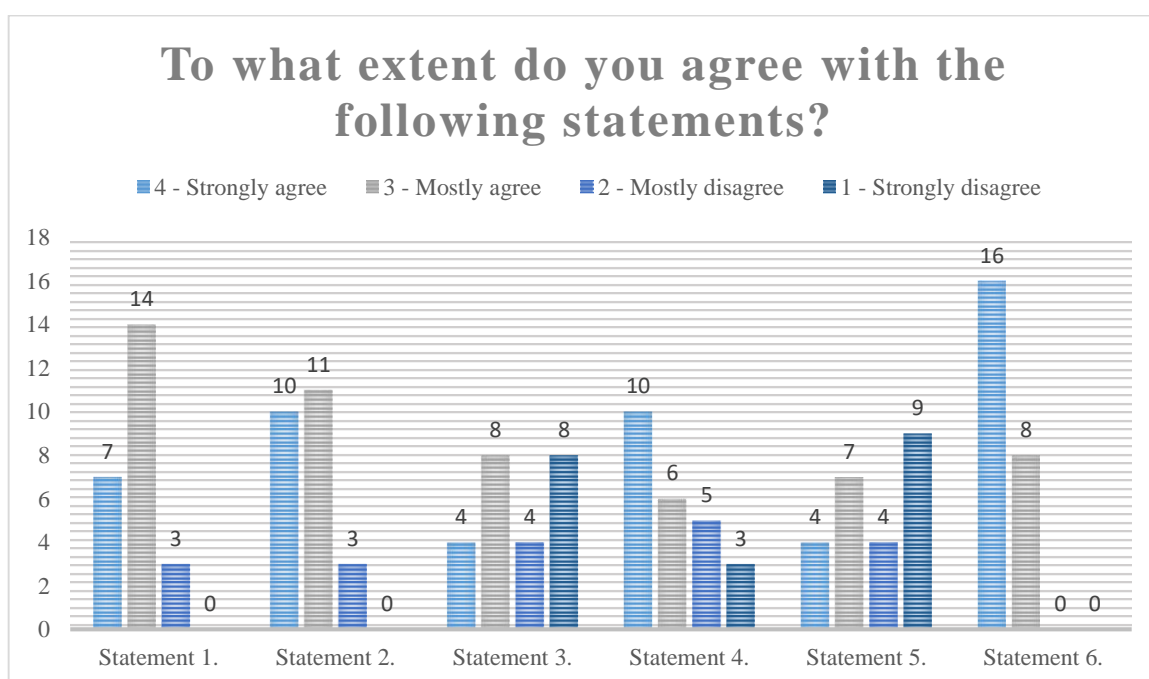Statement 6.: The most difficult students to teach are those who cannot read or write in their mother tongue.

Figure 7: *Challenges of Differentiation in EFL: Insights from Transcarpathian teachers* (Own editing, based on the anonymous questionnaire respondents)

In Figure 7 it is observable that on Statement 1. strong agreement responses dominate (7 strongly- and 14 mostly agree). This implies that a significant majority find differentiation difficult to implement, even if they support the concept in theory. This suggests a practical gap between pedagogical ideals and classroom reality. On Statement 2. the responses are mixed, with mostly agree (11) and strongly agree (10) being the most frequent. The conclusion from this is that the teachers acknowledge the theoretical presence of differentiation in training, but feel underprepared in practical implementation. This points to a training-methodology disconnect. In the following issue, Statement 3 teachers are divided. Some experience resistance or misunderstanding from students or from their parents, while others do not. This may depend on how differentiation is explained and also on the other personalities. On Statement 4, strongly agree and mostly agree responses suggest many have made spontaneous adaptations based on perceived needs. The conclusion drawn by this is that despite the lack of formal diagnoses, teachers often attempt informal differentiation, reflecting both awareness and responsiveness. On Statement 5 responses are evenly distributed, though mostly agree (7) and strongly disagree (9), which mirrors Statement 3: perceptions of unfairness are a recurring concern, especially among more advanced students. Statement 6 brought strong agreement and no disagreement, so functional illiteracy in the native language is obviously seen as a major challenge.

3.2.6   *Future opportunities*

Respondents indicated a high level of openness towards collaborative professional development. Furthermore, all participants believed in the potential effectiveness of differentiation, provided that adequate conditions were in place. Suggestions for support included the development of printed resource collections, differentiated textbooks, forums for experience-sharing, and access to further training or study visits. These responses point to a strong demand for practice-oriented support mechanisms that could facilitate broader and more sustainable implementation of differentiation. A few answers are gathered in Table 3. which summarizes the overall opinion of the respondents:

If all resources were available, how would you create an ideal differentiated learning environment, and in what situations would you differentiate?
In the case of differing levels of development or differing interests, I would apply differentiation and also take into account what learning method is most effective for each individual.

In an ideal differentiated learning environment, I would use a variety of tools and methods: flexible curriculum, group division, optional tasks, technological support, and individual mentoring. I would differentiate based on language level, learning style, pace of progress, and area of interest so that every student could develop according to their own abilities.

At the beginning and end of each semester, I would assess the students' knowledge level with a complex test, and I would use digital platforms where everyone could see their own progress and practice independently. I, as the teacher, would be able to see each student's portfolio, which would make my preparations easier. Instead of identical tests, they would need to complete project-based tasks – the method of which I would suggest, but the final decision would be theirs.

The goal would be to create a space and learning culture where students can learn at their own pace, with motivation and confidence, while also collaborating with others. For example, I would change the classroom equipment, increase the use of digital tools, focus on creating personalized curricula, and provide interactive tasks.

All students would have access to digital devices (laptops, tablets) and would use adaptive learning software that adjusts to their level and provides feedback. In addition to the teacher, a teaching assistant would support the students' progress. In the case of students with special educational needs, appropriate professionals would assist their individual development. Learning would take place in differentiated ways according to ability, learning style, and interest, using various forms of work. The equipment would allow for the creation of a more motivating environment.

Table 3. *Open responses on the Ideal Implementation of Differentiation in EFL Classrooms*
(Own editing, based on the anonymous questionnaire respondents)

To the question regarding the form of resources or support, teachers would need to implement differentiation more effectively, the most preferred form of support was a collection of practical ideas in printed form (91,7%). This indicates a strong desire for easily accessible, ready-to-use resources that can immediately support lesson planning and classroom practice. Moderately requested forms include: Experience exchange in training sessions with specific case discussions (58,3%), showing a need for practice-based, peer-to-peer learning. Funding for study visits to observe real-life language use (50%). The less frequently selected, but still relevant supports are textbooks, first, allowing for multiple learning pathways (41,7%), suggesting that not all current materials are flexible enough for practical use; and the forums to discuss practices with colleagues (20,8%) which, while useful, may be viewed as less structured and productive without facilitation.

To compare these answers with the other 7 responses, it can be said, that actively differentiating teachers value practical idea collection much more (91,7%), than those, who currently not using differentiation (57,1%), likely because they directly experience the challenge of daily planning. Interestingly, non-users ranked the training session discussions higher (85,7%), perhaps because they feel unsure how to begin, but active differentiating teachers are more interested, likely seeking real-world language use and inspiration to improve or refine their own methods.

3.3 Discussion of results of the research

The findings of this study provide a nuanced picture of how differentiation is currently understood and practiced among EFL teachers in Transcarpathia.

The responses to the questionnaire support the answers given by the interviewers, so qualitative and quantitative analyses complement each other well. Teachers reported modifying materials, adjusting group compositions, and varying tasks to meet students at their levels. This consistency between data sources strengthens the reliability of the conclusion that differentiation is not only valued but also actively applied – albeit within certain limitations.

A key pattern that emerged is that differentiation is most often used as a reactive strategy. At first, teachers should really know the classroom, to implement this method. While the most frequent reason to differentiate is the cases when a student is showing signs of learning difficulties, it has other opportunities, to address all forms of learner diversity, not just difficulties.

Communication challenges also surfaced as a noteworthy issue. Several teachers mentioned students or parents perceiving differentiation as unfair. This perception might stem from a lack of transparency or understanding among students and parents, or teachers about why certain learners receive different tasks or support.

Moreover, the study revealed blurred boundaries between differentiation and individualisation, suggesting conceptual confusion that training can address. Teachers often used terms that closely align with individualisation. While both concepts share common ground, differentiation focuses on addressing learner variance within the same classroom structure, whereas individualisation typically allows for more autonomous, self-paced learning. This distinction is crucial for effective implementation and should be clarified through targeted professional development.

Looking forward, several pedagogical and contextual considerations arise:

- Given the growing number of SEN students or students with learning difficulties in the educational system, differentiation is likely to play an increasingly central role in EFL instruction.
- The current socio-political situation in Transcarpathia, which brings together learners from more diverse linguistic backgrounds, may also necessitate more language-based differentiation.

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of differentiation. However, several questions remain unanswered. Further research is needed to explore the deeper layers of differentiated instruction. Additional qualitative studies could provide valuable insights into teachers' decision-making processes and help identify ways to better support educators in applying differentiated strategies more consciously and effectively across diverse classroom settings.

3.4 Consequences and pedagogical implications

Differentiation has long been a widely researched and discussed topic in the field of education. Numerous studies highlight its potential to enhance learner outcomes, while others emphasize the practical challenges teachers often face during its implementation. This thesis aimed to explore the extent to which differentiation is known and practiced among EFL teachers in Transcarpathia, shedding light on the region's specific circumstances and educational realities.

The findings suggest that while the concept of differentiation is not unfamiliar to teachers in the region, their knowledge and application of it often stem from individual initiative rather than formal professional development. In many cases, educators learn about and explore differentiation through personal research, as professional training in this topic often lacks sufficient practical depth. While the concept of differentiation is introduced in training, teachers frequently do not receive concrete resources or actionable guidance to support its effective application in the classroom. This points to a need for increased institutional support and organized development programs that focus specifically on practical strategies for differentiated instruction in the EFL context. Language acquisition is a highly individual process, making it particularly challenging (if not impossible) to meet the needs of all learners with a single approach or attitude.

In practice, differentiation is typically employed with students suspected of having learning difficulties, although formal educational assessments are rare. This reflects a broader systemic issue in the region, where both students with special educational needs (SEN) and their teachers

lack access to official assessments and expert support. Consequently, educators rely heavily on their own resourcefulness, often navigating such challenges without adequate guidance.

The most commonly applied forms of differentiation among respondents are differentiated content and process. However, there is also an openness to exploring other dimensions of differentiation, such as product and learning environment, suggesting that with the right support, teachers would be motivated to implement these as well.

The major barrier to implementation remains the considerable amount of preparation time required, which many teachers find difficult to manage alongside their existing workloads. Despite this, most teachers acknowledge that differentiated instruction leads to more effective learning than a one-size-fits-all approach, and even those who do not currently differentiate express a clear interest in doing so in the future.

Pedagogically, the implications are as follows:
- Personal development must prioritize differentiation, not only as a theatrical framework but through the provision of hands-on, practical strategies.
- Peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and community-building among teachers should be encouraged.
- Educational policy and infrastructure must improve in the field of SEN students and students with learning difficulties.
- Time-saving tools, templates, and ready-to-use differentiated resources would significantly support teachers, especially those working with large or mixed-ability groups.

In summary, while there is a foundational understanding and growing interest in differentiation among EFL teachers in Transcarpathia, their potential can only be fully realized through targeted support, accessible resources, and system-level developments.

CONCLUSIONS

The study focused on the opportunities and challenges of differentiation, collecting the methods or strategies of it, and finding out how differentiation is understood and applied in EFL classrooms in Transcarpathia. This study examined the awareness, application, and challenges of differentiation among Transcarpathian EFL teachers.

Findings show that teachers generally understand the concept and hold positive attitudes toward its use. However, practical implementation is sometimes inconsistent, mainly due to structural barriers, such as time constraints, large class sizes, or expressive preparation demands. Teachers recognize the value of addressing diverse learner needs but often feel unequipped or unsupported to do so in practice.

The survey showed that most EFL teachers in Transcarpathia are familiar with the concept of differentiation, regardless of their teaching experience. Not all teachers actively implement it, but they show interest and openness toward doing so. Differentiation is most commonly applied to students suspected of having learning difficulties. Teachers often differentiate content and process. The main obstacle is the extra preparation time required, which is difficult to manage alongside existing teaching responsibilities. Regardless of the type of teacher, they generally believe that differentiation is more effective than a one-size-fits-all approach. Even those not currently practicing it express interest and willingness to do so if better support and resources were available.

The research contributed valuable insights into an underexplored context and highlighted the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world classroom application. Further research should explore this topic in more detail, and classroom observations could provide richer data on the actual strategies used and adaptations made for various learner needs.

To bridge the gap between intention and practice, teacher training programs – both pre-service and in-service - should offer concrete, context-sensitive guidance on differentiation strategies suited to high-enrolment classrooms. Teacher's forum should be encouraged to share adaptable strategies and support reflective practice. Providing ready-to-use differentiated materials and user-friendly tools would help reduce workload and make implementation more feasible in everyday practice.

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РЕЗЮМЕ

Тема кваліфікаційної роботи є актуальною у зв'язку з необхідністю забезпечення індивідуального підходу до учнів в умовах зростаючого різноманіття у класах. Метою роботи є з'ясувати, як саме розуміється та реалізується диференціація у викладанні англійської мови в регіоні, які методи та стратегії використовуються, а також які труднощі виникають у вчителів на практиці. Основними завданнями були аналіз наукових джерел, збір емпіричних даних через анкетування та інтерв'ю, а також узагальнення результатів дослідження. Для досягнення мети використовувались як якісні, так і кількісні методи дослідження.

Робота складається зі вступу, трьох розділів, висновків, списку використаних джерел та додатків. Загальний обсяг становить 67 сторінок, містить 3 таблиць, 7 графіків, 42 джерел у бібліографії та 3 додатків.

У першому розділі проаналізовано теоретичні основи диференціації в контексті викладання іноземних мов, її основні принципи та класифікації. Другий розділ містить огляд емпіричних досліджень з теми диференціації та розглядає різні підходи й стратегії її впровадження. Останній розділ редставляє емпіричну частину дослідження, пояснює методи збору та аналізу даних, подає результати опитування та обговорює висновки у зв'язку з дослідницькими запитаннями.

Результати показали, що більшість учителів знайомі з поняттям диференціації, незалежно від досвіду викладання. Хоча не всі активно її впроваджують, вони демонструють зацікавленість та відкритість до цього. Найчастіше диференціація застосовується до учнів із підозрою на труднощі у навчанні, здебільшого через адаптацію змісту та процесу навчання. Учителі вважають диференційоване навчання ефективнішим за підхід «один для всіх», і навіть ті, хто наразі не застосовує його, висловлюють готовність це робити за наявності належної підтримки та ресурсів. Водночас виявлено розрив між теоретичними знаннями та реальним втіленням на практиці, що обумовлено нестачею часу, ресурсів, а також недостатньою підтримкою з боку освітніх структур.

Дослідження підкреслює необхідність подальших розвідок у цій темі, зокрема через спостереження на уроках, щоб отримати більш глибоке уявлення про стратегії та адаптації, які використовуються.

Щоб подолати розрив між намірами та практикою, важливо підтримувати професійні спільноти для обміну досвідом, а також забезпечити вчителів готовими до використання матеріалами та зручними інструментами, що полегшать впровадження диференціації в повсякденній практиці.

APPENDICES

Interview questions

1. How long have you been teaching English as a foreign language (EFL)?
2. What age group(s) and proficiency level(s) do you primarily teach?
3. Have you received any training on differentiated instruction? If so, what kind?
4. How would you define differentiation in your own teaching practice?
5. How does differentiation differ from individualisation in your experience?
6. Do you actively implement differentiation in your classroom? If so, how?
7. What are some benefits you have observed when using differentiation in the EFL classroom?
8. How do students respond to differentiated instruction?
9. Have you noticed improvements in student engagement and learning outcomes due to differentiation?
10. What differentiation strategies do you most frequently use? (e.g., content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, learning environment)
11. How do you adapt materials for students with different proficiency levels?
12. Can you share an example of a successful differentiated lesson?
13. Do you use technology to support differentiation? If so, how?
14. What are the biggest challenges you face when implementing differentiation?
15. How do you manage time effectively while differentiating instruction?
16. What resources or support would help you implement differentiation more effectively?
17. How do you handle large or mixed-ability classes while ensuring differentiation?
18. How do you assess students in a differentiated classroom?
19. What types of feedback do you provide to students of different levels?
20. Have you encountered difficulties in assessing students fairly in a differentiated setting?
21. Do you believe differentiation is a realistic approach in everyday teaching? Why or why not?
22. Have your views on differentiation changed over time?
23. What advice would you give to a teacher who wants to start using differentiation in the EFL classroom?

Link to the questionnaire:

**https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdXOjDsGbyQF4v70T4icjAOm06Z_Pnk7Axo
M3uNli_EmVHg_Q/viewform?usp=sharing&ouid=103922808702803976823**

Questions:

1. General Information

1.1. How long have you been teaching English as a foreign language?

- Less than 5 years
- 5–10 years
- 11–20 years
- More than 21 years

1.2. What age group do you teach or have you taught? (Multiple answers allowed)

- Children (6–10 years)
- Pre-teens (11–14 years)
- Teenagers (15–18 years)
- Adults

1.3. What language levels do you teach or have you taught? (Multiple answers allowed)

- Beginner (A1)
- Elementary (A2)
- Intermediate (B1–B2)
- Advanced (C1–C2)

1.4. Have you heard of differentiated instruction?

- No
- Yes, briefly during trainings
- Yes, it was a major topic in training sessions
- Yes, I researched it on my own

What comes to your mind when you see this picture?

- Equal opportunities and equity
- Nonsense, because... "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

2. Understanding Differentiation

2.1. How has your opinion on differentiation changed over time?

- It has become more positive; I see it as more effective

- It hasn't changed significantly

- It has become more negative; it's too hard to implement

2.2. How does differentiation differ from uniform teaching methods? (Multiple answers allowed)

- It gives students more opportunities

- It requires more preparation and organization

- It provides a more effective learning path for each student

- It provides a learning path tailored to students' needs

2.3. Do you actively apply differentiation in your lessons?

- Yes, in every lesson

- Yes, but not in every lesson

- No, but I would like to start

- No, because I don't see it as feasible

2.4. How would you define differentiation in your own teaching practice?

_____

3. Opportunities in Differentiation

3.1. What benefits have you experienced through using differentiation? (Multiple answers allowed)

- Students are more motivated

- Students at different levels improve better

- There are fewer conflicts in class

- It takes more time but is worth it

- Other: (_____)

3.2. Have you noticed changes in students' academic performance?

- Yes, it improved

- No significant change

- It worsened

3.3. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

4 – Strongly agree

3 – Mostly agree

2 – Mostly disagree

1 – Strongly disagree

- "My students are open and respond positively to differentiated instruction."
- "Children learn much better when I bring them something they like or are interested in."

     o "Grouping students by proficiency (even on an institutional level) helps bridge learning gaps, as it's hard to teach both A1 and B1 students in the same group."

4. Methods and Strategies

4.1. What differentiation strategies do you use most often? (Multiple answers allowed)

- Content differentiation (e.g., providing texts of varying difficulty, adjusting the depth of content)
- Process differentiation (e.g., some students work in pairs, others individually, at different paces, with different task types)
- Product differentiation (e.g., students present the same material in different forms: presentation, essay, poster, etc.)
- Learning environment differentiation (e.g., flexible seating, options for group or individual work, mixing digital and paper tools)

4.2. How often do you use some form of differentiation?

- In every lesson
- In every second lesson
- Once or twice a month
- Less frequently

4.3. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

4 – Strongly agree

3 – Mostly agree

2 – Mostly disagree

1 – Strongly disagree

     o "Differentiation is harder in primary classes than with older students."

     o "If we do pair or group work in class, it's better to mix stronger and weaker students instead of forming same-level groups."

     o "For weaker students, the more interactive, fun, or even humorous a lesson is, the better they retain what they learned."

     o "I have had classes where, due to students' different native languages, I had to prepare in more than one language (e.g., in both Ukrainian and Hungarian for grammar explanations or questions)."

4.4. Have you ever suspected that a student might have special educational needs or learning difficulties?

- Yes, but without a formal educational assessment
- Yes, I noticed signs in someone's behavior

- Not yet

4.5. In which two situations do you most often apply differentiation? (Multiple answers allowed)

- When a student is performing exceptionally well
- When a student has learning difficulties
- When a student comes from a disadvantaged background
- When a student has special educational needs (SEN)

5. Challenges of Differentiation

5.1. What are the biggest challenges in differentiation? (Select the three most common ones)

- o Lack of time
- o Large class sizes
- o Managing groups with heterogeneous abilities
- o Lack of resources or tools

5.2. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

4 - Strongly agree

3 - Somewhat agree

2 - Somewhat disagree

1 - Strongly disagree

- o "Differentiation sounds nice on paper, but it's very hard to implement in practice."
- o "Differentiation is discussed in training sessions, but we don't receive many practical tips."
- o "There have been instances when my students (or their parents) perceived differentiation as unfair."
- o "There were cases when I suspected a student had learning difficulties, so I asked them to complete a task in a different way (e.g., orally instead of in writing)."
- o "In my experience, many students (or their parents) perceive the implementation of differentiation as unfair. They feel they have to work more or receive harder tasks when I assign based on ability and they are more advanced."
- o "The most difficult students to teach are those who cannot read or write in their mother tongue."

6. Future Opportunities

6.1. If all resources were available, how would you create an ideal differentiated learning environment, and in what situations would you differentiate?

_____

6.2. What resources or support would you need to implement differentiation more effectively?

-                 A collection of practical ideas (in printed form)
-                 Textbooks that allow for different "paths"
-                 A forum to discuss practices with colleagues
-                 Funding for study trips to see practical, differentiated learning environments
-                 Exchange of experiences in training sessions, discussing specific cases

(If you do not currently use differentiation actively)

3.1 Have you ever tried using differentiation? If yes, why did you stop?

- Yes
- No
- I haven't tried it yet
- Yes, I didn't stop, just reduced it
- I tried it, but it is hard to sustain with many students

3.2 If all conditions were ideal, would you consider differentiation effective in the classroom?

- Yes, definitely
- Rather yes
- Rather not
- No, definitely not

3.3 What student, teacher, or external factors make the implementation of differentiation difficult?

- Lack of time
- Too many students in one group
- Administrative burdens
- Rigidity of textbooks
- The curriculum doesn't allocate enough time for it

3.4 If you had a colleague who successfully applies differentiation, would you be open to observing their class or asking them for advice?

- Yes, definitely
- Rather yes
- Rather not
- No, under no circumstances

3.5 What resources or support would be helpful for a more effective implementation of differentiation?

_____

APPENDIX 3.

Interviews

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