

# DIFFERENTIATED TASKS FOR DIFFERENT LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY

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## ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate students understand the instructions and students able to do the tasks given and to determine differentiated tasks for a different level of proficiency. Based on the classroom observations, it was evident that students have difficulties to understand instructions in the classroom and it affects their ability to participate and complete the classroom activities. This study was conducted in a secondary school in Ipoh, Perak. There were seven boys and five girls as participants who took part in this study. The method of action research was used to conduct this study. The researcher conducted two-times interventions in the science laboratory because the interventions required participants to move around. The participants were grouped into three according to their proficiency level; advanced, intermediate and beginner. The interventions involved 4 differentiated tasks that were designed equally the same with altered instructions for each group of proficiency. Data were collected using a student's checklist and student's rating. The research revealed that the participants do understand short simple instructions in hands-on activities and they are able to participate. Moreover, the participants have their own preference of differentiated tasks they believe they learn better based their proficiency level. The study implicates that differentiated tasks are beneficial for students with different level of proficiency in order to understand the instructions used and to participate in classroom activities.

**Keywords:** differentiated instructions, differentiated tasks, level of proficiency, classroom activities.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This section explains the background of the study for this action research. The researcher conducts a study on differentiated tasks that fit students' level of proficiency. The students have difficulties to understand instructions used in the classroom by the teacher and it affect students motivation to participate in classroom activities. After a thorough observation and a set of a questionnaire given out to students in order to identify the reason to this problem, the researcher find out that the difference in proficiency level among students does affect students to understand instructions.

During my teaching practice, I realized that my students didn't finish any tasks or homework that I provided. Also, they often didn't participate in classroom activities. The reason is they didn't understand the instructions used in the classroom. Therefore, I decided to use differentiated tasks that cater to a different level of proficiency among students. With this in mind, these are the research questions for this study:

1. Do students understand the instructions from tasks given?
2. Do students able to execute the tasks given?
3. What differentiated tasks fit the learners with different proficiency?

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Definition of Differentiated Instruction**

In the attempt to find what define the differentiated instructions, I searched through a bunch of books, case study, research and articles. According to (Tomlinson & Allan, Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms, 2000), differentiated instruction is “a teacher’s reacting responsively to learner’s needs.” They explain further by saying that “differentiation is attending to the learning needs of a particular student or small group of students rather than the more typical pattern of teaching the class as though all individuals in it were basically the same” (p.4).

It is a fact that teachers deal with students from different academic backgrounds, different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds including different learning styles and interests in the classrooms. For example, one may find students who are visual learners, others might learn better with hands-on activities in a single classroom. There are also students who prefer working individually while others prefer working actively with their classmates. With today’s schooling state, a teacher’s job is not only limited to one-size-fits-all strategy to teach a whole classroom like the previous years before. Instead, (Fordlund, 2003) mentions that “teachers are clearly challenged by the task of diversifying instruction in order to help every child meet their full potential” (p.1). Furthermore (Anderson, 2007) corresponds by adding that “the utmost importance to the teacher who differentiates is providing a learning environment and opportunities that exclude no child” (p.50).

In order for ESL (English as a second language) students to benefit the most from differentiated instructions, students’ specific needs, culture and linguistic differences must be taken into account as they need to feel that they are a part of the classroom community. Differentiated instruction allows students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing entry points, learning tasks, and outcomes tailored to students’ learning needs” (Watts-Taff, Laster, Broach, Marinak, Connor, & Walker-Dolhouse, 2012).

### **Differentiated Tasks**

Differentiated through process means how teacher assigns well-developed and suitable activities for students to understand or make sense of the content. Real life learning should enable students to retain, apply and transfer content that happens in them. The word process is often used as a synonym for activities and tasks. Teachers differentiate by selecting the most appropriate strategy for a task to facilitate each student’s engagement and learning.

According to book entitled Differentiated Classroom Practice Learning for All published in 2016, teachers design both authentic and relevant tasks for students so they can actively engage with the concepts, information and skills identified in the curriculum. It also mentions that tasks that contain a number of entry points and directions, will lend themselves well to differentiation. Furthermore, tasks can be differentiated by pre-planning prompts, questions and supports that will enable and support learning for those students experiencing difficulty, and that increase the degree of challenge and complexity for those students who need extension.

A book entitled *Differentiated Classroom Practice Learning for All* also suggests a guidance to design differentiated tasks for two group of students; enablers and extenders. For enablers or weak students, the tasks must support students who experience difficulty getting started or during the task, provide extra scaffolding, create active experiences that lead into the task, provide an intermediate step that incorporate background knowledge understanding or skills and a 'guided tour' of the task by teacher. Meanwhile, for extenders, the tasks should extend students' capability of learning quickly, create more challenging questions to extend their breadth, depth and complexity, create active experience that build from the task, extend the level of thinking of the task by using Bloom's Taxonomy, and use open-ended tasks that require independent application of the learning.

It is important to recognize that differentiated tasks are an approach to teaching, not simply a collection of strategies or activities. Ford (2012) mentions that effective differentiation requires 'on-going evaluation of students' needs and conscious attention to designing instructional activities and assessment to meet those needs. Furthermore, every student is not learning something different; they are all learning the same thing but in a diverse methods. Every student does not need to be taught individually as differentiating task is a matter of presenting the same task in different ways and at different levels, thus all students can approach it in their own ways (Irujo, 2005).

### **3.0 RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **SAMPLES**

An action research design was used in this study. The population for the study covers secondary school students in a district in Perak. A total number of 12 students were sampled using a set of questionnaire. There are 7 boys and 5 girls. The samples are a group of different level of proficiency; beginner, intermediate and advanced learners. The samples are from a class that I always get observed from both supervisor and mentor teacher.

The study is conducted in science laboratory as the samples are in groups and the chosen tasks require them to move around. I received permission from the samples' parents, mentor teacher and school administration in Week 4. I met the samples' parents in Week 7 where the school had a report card day with all students. I was assigned to be an assistant teacher for the samples' class, therefore I informed the parents right away that I will be conducting action research and the students from that class would be my samples. Both mentor teacher and school administration allowed me to carry out the study after school year-end examinations. Besides, I handed out a consent form of taking pictures and record a video of the samples participating in this study to the samples' parents. This is because one of the interventions used in this study requires the samples to be recorded.

The study is executed for 4 weeks during my practicum. In week 12, I handed out a set of questionnaire to the samples in a computer lab to identify what they feel towards my instructions used in the classroom. In week 14, I went through the feedback from the questionnaire. I prepared the suitable interventions for the samples and I had a consultation with my mentor teacher about it. My mentor teacher was the samples' class English teacher before I entered school, therefore she knows the students better than me. I carried out the study in two weeks which are week 15 and 16. I had a practicum extension for two weeks due to my hospital admission for a week. I executed the interventions twice in two weeks and I discussed with the mentor teacher after each intervention.

## **INSTRUMENTS**

In this study, two instruments were chosen in collecting data, which are student's checklist and student's rating. Student's checklist was used for two research questions; students understand the instructions or no and students able to do the tasks or no. Meanwhile, the student's rating was for students to choose one activity that they like and learn better.

The researcher prepared 4 interventions to provide further details in order to answer the research questions. The 4 interventions were differentiated tasks and they were all different from each level of proficiency. The instructions used in each intervention were different for each level of proficiency. The interventions or activities were Story Burst, Learning Stations, Think Dot and Task Cards. After samples did the intervention, they had to answer students' checklist for both research question 1 and 2. At the end of the study, the researcher asked students to rate one activity that they like and learn better according to their proficiency level on the student's rating.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

Data collection procedures in this study were divided into two sessions, which were student's checklist and student's rating. Before the research topic was decided, the researcher observed the chosen class for two weeks and found out that students had difficulties to participate in classroom activities and complete the homework given. Due to that, the researcher distributed a set of questionnaire to the students to find the reason behind it. From the questionnaire, the researcher identified that students have difficulties to understand the instructions used in the classroom and that affect them to participate in classroom activities or complete any homework. After identified the problem, four interventions focused on differentiated tasks were carried out on the chosen 16 samples.

Story Burst and Learning Stations were used in the first and second interventions on the first time. Think Dots and Task Cards were used in the third and fourth interventions on the second time. The frequencies of students understand the instructions and able to do the activities during the interventions were calculated and recorded in the student's checklist. Meanwhile, students' preference for activities that they like and learn better according to their proficiency level was calculated in student's rating.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

In order to analyse the data collected from the students' checklist, a descriptive statistical analysis was used by the researcher. The data gathered from the checklist were tabulated in form of line chart by using frequency counts. The data composed from the students' rating of the activities were tabulated in form of bar chart.

## **4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This study aims to identify students understand the instructions, execute the tasks excellently and determine differentiation tasks that students like and learn better. The samples are grouped into 3 level of proficiency; advanced, intermediate and beginner. Each group consists of 4 samples with a mixture of girls and boys. This section presents the findings of the study to answer the research questions.

#### 4.1 RQ1: Do students understand the instructions from tasks given?

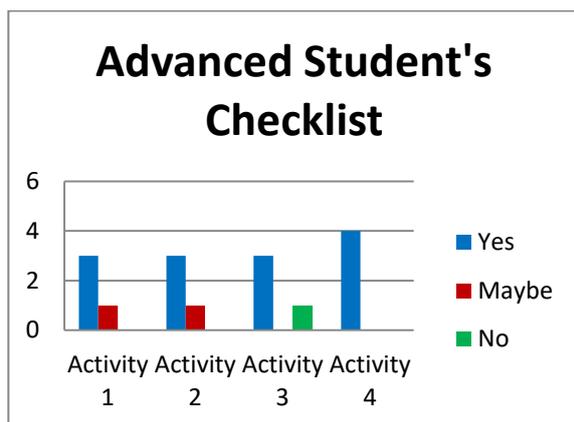


Figure 1

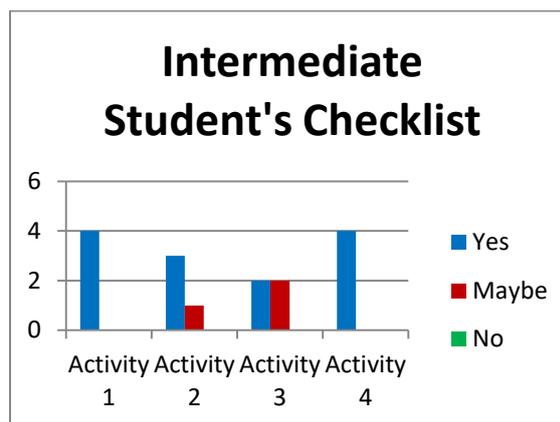


Figure 2

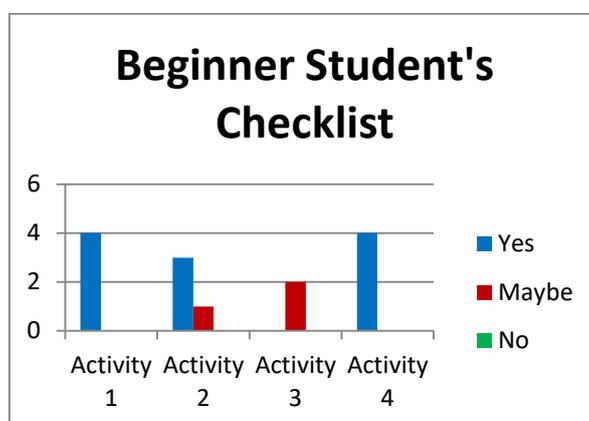


Figure 3

In order to answer research question 1, the researched carried out a student's checklist which involves four interventions. The result of the students' checklist is shown in Figure 1 until Figure 3.

For advanced group, 3 out of 4 samples can understand the instruction for Activity 1 and Activity 2. Only 1 sample doesn't understand the instruction in Activity 3 and all samples managed to comprehend the instruction in Activity 4. The results indicate that advanced students are competent in understanding instructions regardless of any types of activity conducted in classroom. This is because advanced students have a larger vocabulary and basic understanding of the English language (Tomlinson, 2005).

Meanwhile, in intermediate group, 4 out of 4 samples understand the instruction in both Activity 1 and 4. There is only 1 sample that is uncertain with the instructions from Activity 2. However, the samples are divided into two as two of them understand the instruction and another two are quite vague with the instruction for Activity 3. The results indicate that intermediate students are more into simple instructions. The reason behind this is the use of clear and concise language reduces possible confusion among students and they will be more engage in tasks (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

As for beginner group, the samples understand the instructions for both Activity 1 and Activity 4. 1 out of 4 samples is incompetent to understand the instruction used in Activity 2. But, all samples are agreed to choose 'maybe' for Activity 3 as it means they have a vague idea of what the instructions ask them to do. The results indicate that beginner students

need step-by-step instructions accompanied with demonstrations for them to understand what the tasks require them to do. This is because they need time to process English words and gestures are important for them to understand the instructions.

Overall, most samples do understand instructions in Activity 1, 2 and 4 as the instructions are short, simple and the instructions follow the level of difficulty of tasks. Hence, the samples are most likely able to understand it. Unfortunately, few samples have difficulty to understand instruction in Activity 3 regardless of their proficiency level. In regards to instructions used for each intervention, students are competent to understand clear, concise and unambiguous wording and terminology. Owing to that fact, the complexity of instructions used in the classroom should depend on students' receptive vocabulary as in this case, the level of proficiency to reduce possible confusion. Apart from that, it is necessary to provide step-by-step demonstrations when delivering instructions as it benefits students in terms of engagement on task and promote high levels of success, especially on an intermediate and advanced group of learners.

#### 4.2 RQ2: Do students able to execute the tasks given?

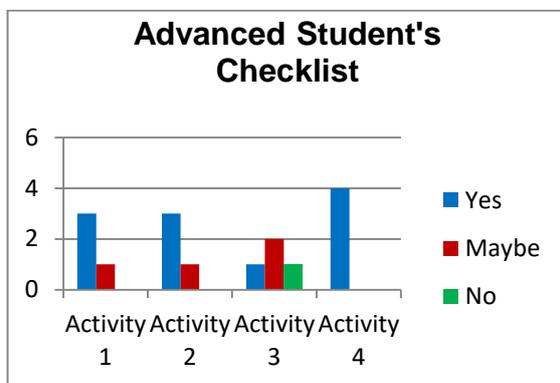


Figure 4

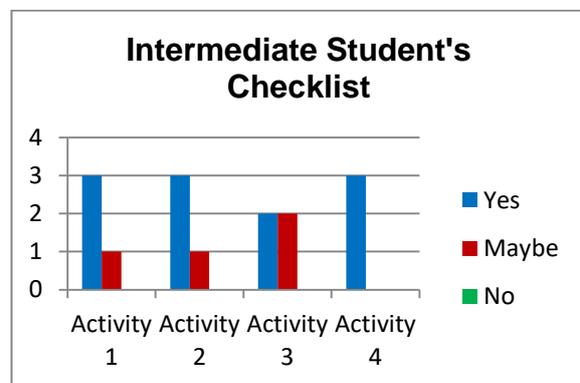


Figure 5

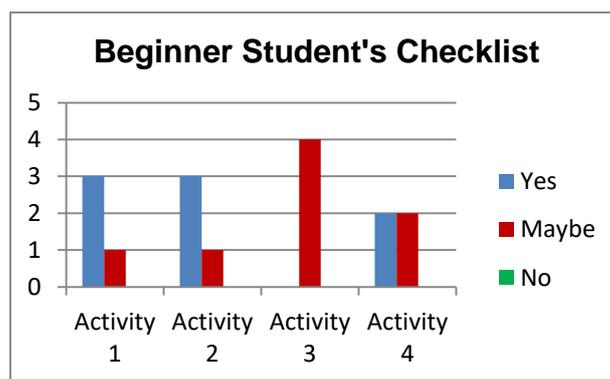


Figure 6

To answer research question 2, the researcher carried out another set of a student's checklist involving four interventions. The result of the students' checklist is shown in Figure 4 until Figure 6.

For advanced group of students, 3 out 4 samples are able to execute the tasks for Activity 1 and 2. However, Activity 3 receive mixed response from the samples because only 1 sample can do the task, 2 out 4 samples are unsure with their ability to execute the task and 1 sample choose 'no.' All samples agree that they can do Activity 4. The result

shows that advanced learners prefer challenging communicative activities because they are designed to be lively, interactive and fun which encourage them to speak English more (Bauer, Benkstein, Pittel, & Koury, 2013).

Meanwhile, intermediate group shows a great response to this research question. 3 out of 4 samples believe they can do Activity 1 and Activity 2. For Activity 3, the samples are divided into two stands, as 2 of them can do the task and 2 of them are unable to do the task. All samples concur that they can do Activity 4. The result shows that intermediate learners learn best when learning is active and this is because learners use all of their senses as it helps their brain to retain information easier and quicker (Cox, 2015).

As for beginner group, only 3 samples can do the task in Activity 1 and 2. However, all 4 samples believe they cannot do the tasks very well in Activity 3. For Activity 4, the samples are divided into two stands, as 2 of them can do the task and 2 of them are not sure whether they are able to do the task or no. The result shows that beginner students need time to do speaking skill activities openly because they often feel shy with their language proficiency although they can do other language skills activities.

In conclusion, most samples can do tasks in Activity 1, 2 and 4 as the activities have short simple instructions and require the samples to move around to do the tasks. However, it is strongly suggested that most samples cannot do Activity 3 as they don't know how to do it despite some of them mentioned that they can understand the instructions. For intermediate and advanced students, they are keen towards challenging interactive activities that spark their interest the most. Plus, they have the competitiveness within themselves when working with group member which do motivate them to complete the work. Nonetheless, it is a different case with beginner students. Slow learners should be guided with more simple activities which act as a practice for them to master the language first compared to other groups of learners. The slow learners need more time to practice or open up when it comes to speaking activities because they can be very timid and shy to speak English in front of their friends.

### 4.3 RQ3: What differentiated tasks fit the learners with different proficiency?

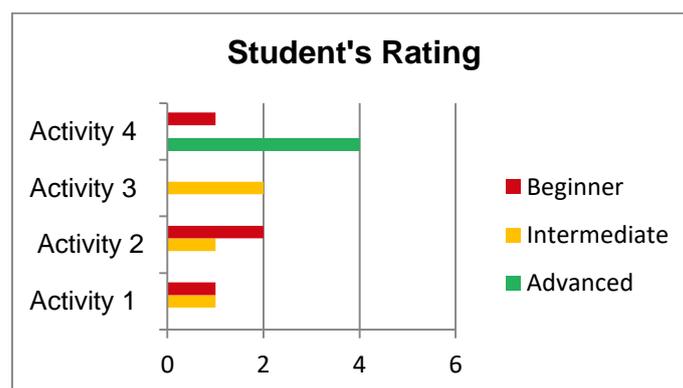


Figure 7

To answer research question 3, the researcher carried out a student' rating on students' preference of activities that they like and learn better according to their proficiency level. The result of students' rating is shown in Figure 7.

As shown in Figure 7, advanced samples choose Activity 4 as their preference of activity that they like the most compared to the other activities. Intermediate samples have mixed response because two of them choose Activity 3 as their preference and the

remaining two samples choose Activity 1 and Activity 2. The result also shows that beginner samples like Activity 2 the most. Although two samples from beginner group select Activity 1 and Activity 4 accordingly.

In general, the result indicates that most students favour tasks that have simple and concise instructions in hands-on activities because it promotes guidance and structure for students to comprehend the instructions (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Plus, hands-on activities optimize engaged time because the more time students are actively participating in instructional activities, the more they learn. Moreover, a differentiated task promotes high levels of success and increase content coverage among students regardless of their proficiency level.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

From this study, it can be concluded that the use of differentiated tasks for a different level of proficiency students is effective in improving students understand the instructions used in the classroom. Due to that, different levels of proficiency students are able to complete the activities that are designed equally the same among them although the instructions are dissimilar. Furthermore, this study also shows that students have their own preferences of differentiated tasks that they believe they can learn better according to their activity's rating. Most of the students do agree that clear and concise instructions help them understand the instructions and indirectly guide them to achieve the goals of the designed activities. Therefore, differentiated tasks are effective for a different level of proficiency students.

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## INSTRUMENT – Student’s Checklist and Student’s Rating

### Feedbacks on Activities Conducted

Name: Jebon

Proficiency: Advanced

Instruction: There are 4 activities that you will be doing. For each activity, there are 3 questions only. Tick ✓ to answer the questions below.

#### Activity 1 – STORY BURST

Num.	Questions	Tick one answer only		
		Yes	Maybe	No
1.	Can you understand the instruction?		✓	
2.	Are you able to do the activity?	✓		
3.	Do you understand the lesson?	✓		

#### Activity 2 – LEARNING STATIONS

Num.	Questions	Tick one answer only		
		Yes	Maybe	No
1.	Can you understand the instruction?		✓	
2.	Are you able to do the activity?		✓	
3.	Do you understand the lesson?		✓	

#### Activity 3 – THINK DOTS

Num.	Questions	Tick one answer only		
		Yes	Maybe	No
1.	Can you understand the instruction?			✓
2.	Are you able to do the activity?			✓
3.	Do you understand the lesson?		✓	

#### Activity 4 – TASK CARDS

Num.	Questions	Tick one answer only		
		Yes	Maybe	No
1.	Can you understand the instruction?	✓		
2.	Are you able to do the activity?	✓		
3.	Do you understand the lesson?	✓		

Write 1 activity that you like the most and understand better: Activity 4