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DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IMPLEMENTATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT COURSES: PERSPECTIVES FROM LECTURERS AND STUDENTS AT HANOI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

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Abstract: This study explores the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) in language skills development courses for English majors at Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE). The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, collecting quantitative data through questionnaires with 207 students and 18 lecturers, and qualitative data through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with selected lecturers. The findings demonstrate that lecturers and students generally perceived DI as necessary; however, its implementation was uneven. In addition, DI implementation was limited to content and process differentiation, while product and learning environment differentiation were less evident. The findings also identify a number of factors that influenced the implementation of DI, including large class sizes, limited lesson duration, rigorous curriculum, learner diversity and other teacher-related factors. The study suggests that a clearer insight into the concept and greater support from the university are required to enhance DI implementation in university English classrooms.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, language skills development courses, English language teaching, mixed-ability classrooms, higher education

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TRIỂN KHAI DẠY HỌC PHÂN HOÁ TRONG CÁC HỌC PHẦN THỰC HÀNH TIẾNG ANH: GÓC NHÌN TỪ GIẢNG VIÊN VÀ SINH VIÊN TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM HÀ NỘI

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu^o tìm hiểu việc triển khai dạy học phân hoá (DI) trong các học phần thực hành tiếng dành cho sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, dữ liệu được thu thập qua bảng hỏi với 207 sinh viên và 18 giảng viên, quan sát lớp học và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc được thực hiện với một số giảng viên được lựa chọn. Kết quả cho thấy cả giảng viên và sinh viên nhìn chung đều nhận thức được sự cần thiết của dạy học phân hoá. Tuy nhiên, việc triển khai dạy học phân hoá còn chưa đồng đều và thường chỉ tập trung vào phân hoá nội dung và quá trình, trong khi phân hoá sản phẩm và môi trường học tập chưa được thể hiện rõ ràng. Nghiên cứu cũng xác định một số yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc triển khai dạy học phân hoá, bao gồm: sĩ số lớp học lớn, thời lượng bài học hạn chế, chương trình học mang tính nghiêm ngặt, sự đa dạng của người học và các yếu tố liên quan đến giảng viên. Nghiên cứu đề xuất cần có sự hiểu biết rõ ràng hơn về khái niệm dạy học phân hoá, cùng với sự hỗ trợ mạnh mẽ hơn từ phía nhà trường, nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả triển khai dạy học phân hoá trong các lớp học tiếng Anh ở bậc đại học.

Từ khoá: dạy học phân hoá, học phần thực hành tiếng, giảng dạy tiếng Anh, lớp học đa trình độ, giáo dục đại học

1. Introduction

Contemporary English classes, especially at the university level, tend to include a diverse range of students. Learners may differ significantly in terms of English proficiency levels, interests or learning preferences, which causes a great number of difficulties for lecturers. In Vietnam, university students tend to have varying levels of language proficiency due to multiple pathways for admissions. Some students may gain direct admission because they have won prizes in the national exams for gifted students. Some students are granted direct admission since they are graduates of the specialized high schools with international certificates such as IELTS, TOEFL or SAT. In addition, some universities, including Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE), administer their own competency-based entrance examinations. Besides, a large proportion of students are admitted based on their scores in the national high school graduation examination. Nonetheless, the universities' competency-based entrance examinations and the national high school graduation examination primarily assess students' knowledge of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (and writing skills occasionally) while their listening and speaking skills are typically not assessed. As a result, there is a wide disparity in their language levels, particularly in listening, speaking and writing skills.

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It is, therefore, of paramount importance that teachers employ appropriate methods to address student diversity and help students boost their language proficiency and grow academically. In order to cater to student differences, educational paradigms throughout the world have shifted towards approaches which allow flexibility and personalization. Among the prominent approaches is differentiated instruction (DI), a framework that proactively tailors instruction to respond to student diversity.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study is conducted to explore the current implementation of DI in English language skills development courses (i.e. Listening & Speaking and Reading & Writing) for English majors at HNUE. In order to achieve the aim, the research seeks the answers to the following questions:

- 1. How do lecturers and students perceive DI and its pedagogical necessity in English language skills development courses?*
- 2. To what extent and through what forms of classroom practice is DI implemented in these courses?*
- 3. What factors constrain or facilitate the implementation of DI in these courses?*

3. Literature Review

3.1. Definitions of Differentiated Instruction

The term “differentiated instruction” has been increasing in popularity in recent years (Murchan & Shiel, 2024). According to Tomlinson (2001), it is a systematic and proactive process to plan curriculum and instruction designed to address student diversity in readiness levels, interests and learning profiles. In addition, Gregory (2013) and Tomlinson and Imbeau (2023) emphasize that DI is a philosophical and pedagogical approach to instruction, not merely a set of instructional activities. The central core of DI is to maximize each student’s learning potential.

3.2. Core Elements of Differentiated Instruction

To differentiate instruction, it is of vital importance that teachers gain a deep insight into student differences, including readiness, interests and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001). Readiness refers to students’ prior knowledge and experiences about what they are going to learn. When preparing for a lesson, teachers must decide whether students have sufficient prerequisite knowledge and are ready for the new lesson. Interest is students’ curiosity and interest in learning. Tomlinson (2001) suggests that if students are inquisitive about a theme or a topic, they are more likely to succeed in learning. Learning profile is students’ preferred way of learning. Based on their understanding of their learners, teachers can modify classroom elements to maximize each student’s learning potential, namely content, process, product and affect/learning environment (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023).

Content is the knowledge, concepts and skills that students are expected to know, understand or be able to do, and it is often defined by curriculum standards and learning objectives. In a DI classroom, although all students need to work towards a mutual understanding, they may be provided with different learning materials to achieve the objectives. Common strategies to differentiate content include providing learning materials at different complexity levels, exploiting various forms of instructional media or supplying supplementary resources to those who require extra support or challenge (Eisenmann, 2019).

Process refers to how students make sense of the input presented to them. Process can

be differentiated in a number of ways. Teachers can vary the cognitive demands of the tasks, use flexible grouping (individual, pair or group work), or provide intentional scaffolding (Eisenmann, 2019).

Product is the way students demonstrate what they have learnt over a space of time - a unit, a semester or an academic year. Differentiating products allows students to demonstrate their learning in a modality which aligns with their strengths and interests. Teachers can differentiate products by allowing a wide range of product formats (e.g. portfolio, debate or essay) or by tiering products by complexity (Eisenmann, 2019).

Affect/learning environment is “the climate or tone of the classrooms” (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 20). To be more specific, affect encompasses not only students’ inner feelings but also the outer factors that foster these feelings. Teachers can differentiate the affect/learning environment by creating a flexible classroom arrangement or fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment that supports diverse learners.

3.3. Previous Studies

Throughout the world, numerous studies have examined DI, many of which have explored specific strategies for implementing DI in K-12 language classrooms. Religioni et al. (2024) conducted a systematic literature review, and found that content and process differentiation were widely practiced. Also, they suggested that the most common strategies for content differentiation included tiered materials and adjusted materials, while tiered instructions, adjusted instructions, and learning contracts were frequently used to differentiate the learning process. Similarly, Kamarulzaman et al. (2017) highlighted the most common practical strategies that supported DI implementation, such as flexible grouping, tiered materials, presentation, or discussion to provide more responsive learning experiences.

In addition, previous studies investigated the impacts of DI on students’ motivation and engagement, and the findings revealed that students felt more motivated and actively engaged in lessons due to greater choice (Scarparolo & Mackinnon, 2024; Ziernwald et al., 2022). Researchers also explored the factors that supported or hindered the implementation of DI in the classrooms. Numerous factors that supported DI were identified, including professional development activities, managers’ support, or the availability of materials and technology (Hu, 2024; Ziernwald et al., 2022). By contrast, researchers found out that despite the awareness of the benefits DI offers, teachers did not differentiate their instruction due to a number of barriers: lack of time for planning and implementation, lack of training, big class sizes, curriculum rigidity and limited resources (Nayman & Altun, 2022; Gibbs, 2023; Ziernwald et al., 2022).

Similar to international contexts, much of the existing literature in Vietnam focuses on the implementation of DI in K-12 settings. Researchers explored the practical application of differentiated strategies in teaching specific subjects, revealing that although teachers were highly aware of the benefits of DI, they encountered such significant barriers as large class sizes, standardized curricula, limited resources and pressure of high-stakes exams (Tran, 2025). At the higher education level, research remains scarce. Among just a few studies is one carried out by Vu (2023), who developed a differentiated teaching competency framework for students majoring in physical education. Little research has been conducted to explore DI implementation in English language teaching, particularly in higher education settings. This study is, therefore, conducted to fill that gap in the literature.

4. Research Methods

4.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design to investigate the implementation of DI in English language skills development courses at HNUE. The quantitative strand examined perceptions, pedagogical necessity, implementation, and influencing factors, while the qualitative strand provided classroom-based insights into how DI was enacted in practice through a multiple-case study orientation (Yin, 2018).

4.2. Participants

The questionnaire survey was conducted with 207 students and 18 lecturers at the Faculty of English, HNUE, as detailed below:

Table 1

Sample

Student Sample	Frequency	Percentage
Year of Study		
Year 1	133	64.00
Year 2	8	4.00
Year 3	30	14.00
Year 4	36	17.00
Gender		
Male	46	22.00
Female	161	78.00
Academic ability		
National High School Graduation Examination score		
Below 7	9	4.00
From 7 to 8	39	19.00
From 8 to 8.5	25	12.00
From 8.5 to 9	37	18.00
Above 9	95	46.00
Exempted	2	1.00
English proficiency certificate		
IELTS	20	10.00
C1 APTIS	1	0.48
None	160	77.00
Missing	26	13.00
Location of high school attended		
Mountainous, island, or disadvantaged areas	17	8.00
Rural areas	48	23.00
Urban areas (city/town)	142	69.00
Teacher Sample		
	Frequency	Percentage
N	18	
Male	2	11.11
Female	16	88.89
Educational qualification		
Bachelor's degree	2	11.11
Master's degree	13	72.22

Doctoral degree	3	16.67
Teaching experience		
Less than 5 years	6	33.33
From 5 to 10 years	3	16.67
From 10 to 15 years	3	16.67
Above 15 years	6	33.33

Following the preliminary survey, the study used a purposive sampling technique to select three teachers from the list of lecturers based on student nominations to participate in the case study. The selection criteria included years of experience, qualifications, and genders to ensure diversity and the ability to provide rich data for the study.

4.3. Data Collection Tools

Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires designed in Google Forms and distributed to lecturers and students. The questionnaire items were reviewed by experts for relevance and clarity, and the instrument showed acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .832. Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with the three selected lecturers.

4.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were processed using Microsoft Excel and analysed through descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically to support and deepen the interpretation of the survey findings. To enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, observation notes and interview data were compared across cases in order to identify recurring patterns and reduce idiosyncratic interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Nevertheless, as the qualitative coding was conducted by a single researcher, the findings should be interpreted with an awareness of potential researcher subjectivity.

5. Findings

5.1. Current State of Lecturers' Perceptions of Differentiated Instruction

This section addresses research question 1 by examining lecturers' perceptions of DI. Specifically, it explores their understanding of the concept and key principles of DI before examining how it is implemented in classroom practice.

Table 2

Lecturers' Perceptions of DI

TT	Lecturers' perceptions of differentiated instruction	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	DI is a proactive strategy in which teachers respond to students' differences in three key characteristics: readiness, interests, and learning profiles.	16	88.8	2	11.1	0	0.0
2	DI is a learner-centered approach designed to address learners' diverse needs.	17	94.4	1	5.5	0	0.0
3	DI means that teachers create completely separate and individualized lesson plans for each student in the class.	17	94.4	1	5.5	0	0.0

4	DI mainly focuses on adjusting lesson content only for low-achieving students to help them catch up with the general curriculum.	1	5.5	6	33.3	11	61.1
5	I am not familiar with the concept of DI.	0	0.0	4	22.2	14	77.7

The findings show that the lecturers generally hold a positive perception of DI. Most lecturers agreed that DI is a proactive and learner-centered approach that addresses students' diversity in readiness, interests and learning profiles. Additionally, the majority of the lecturers (95%) rejected the view that DI only targets low-achieving students to assist them in attaining the expected learning outcomes, and all the lecturers reported that they were accustomed to the concept of DI. These results demonstrate that DI has become a relatively well-recognized pedagogical approach among the lecturers in the study.

However, the findings also reveal an inconsistency in the lecturers' understanding of the concept. The majority of lecturers agreed that DI means designing completely different lessons for each student in the class. This understanding is inconsistent with the theoretical framework of DI, which emphasizes the modification of content, process, product and affect/learning environment within the same classroom based on teachers' understanding of the students rather than full individualization. Therefore, despite the lecturers' appreciation for DI, their understanding may not have been entirely precise, underscoring a need for professional support in distinguishing DI from individualized instruction or other similar concepts.

5.2. Perceived Necessity of Differentiated Instruction

This section addresses research question 1 by examining lecturers' and students' perceived necessity of DI. Their responses provide an overview of the extent to which both groups consider DI necessary in the university ELT context.

Table 3

Perceived Necessity of Differentiated Instruction

Perceived necessity of differentiated instruction	Student survey		Lecturer survey	
	N	%	N	%
Very necessary	69	33.3	13	72.2
Necessary	122	58.9	3.0	16.6
Neutral	15	7.2	2.0	11.1
Not necessary at all	1	0.5	0.0	0.0

The survey results indicate that both students and lecturers alike generally believe that DI is necessary, although there is a difference in the level of perceived necessity between the two groups. Regarding students, the majority (58.9%) perceived DI as necessary, and 33.3% considered it very necessary. A smaller proportion of students (7.2%) selected the neutral option while only one student indicated that DI is not necessary at all.

In contrast, the lecturers expressed a stronger perception of necessity. The majority viewed DI as very necessary or necessary with 72.2% and 16.6% respectively. Only two lecturers showed a neutral belief in the necessity of DI, and none indicated that DI is not necessary at all.

5.3. Extent of Differentiated Instruction Implementation in Language Skills Development Courses

This section addresses research question 2 by examining the extent to which DI is applied in language skills development courses. It compares lecturers' and students' perceptions of how frequently DI is implemented across lessons and activities.

Table 4*Extent of Applying DI in Language Skills Development Courses*

Extent of applying DI in language skills development courses	Student survey		Lecturer survey	
	N	%	N	%
Always applied in all lessons (100% of lessons)	21	10.00	1	5.56
Frequently applied in teaching (80% or more of lessons)	84	41.00	5	27.78
Applied only in certain lessons or activities	70	34.00	9	50.00
Rarely applied in lessons or teaching activities	22	11.00	2	11.11
Never applied	10	5.00	1	5.56

The findings demonstrate that DI was implemented in English language skills development courses; however, its implementation was uneven across the lessons and activities. From the students' perspective, DI was manifested on a regular basis, with 10% stating that it was applied in all lessons and 41% reporting that it was frequently used. On the other hand, 34% believed that DI was only applied in certain lessons or activities, whereas 16% reported DI was rarely or never applied in the classrooms. These figures suggest that despite its visibility in classroom practice, DI was not consistently integrated throughout the course.

Regarding teachers' responses, only 5.56% reported implementing DI in all the lessons, and 27.78% indicated frequent implementation. It is noteworthy that 50% stated that they differentiated instruction only in certain lessons or activities. In addition, it was acknowledged that 16.67% of the lecturers rarely or never applied DI. Altogether, these results reveal an evident gap between teachers' perception of the necessity of DI and their actual level of implementation. In other words, although the majority of lecturers regarded DI as necessary, their classroom implementation appeared selective rather than systematic, suggesting that DI has not yet become a stable and consistent instructional practice in these courses.

5.4. Methods and Forms of Differentiated Instruction

This section addresses research question 2 by examining the methods and forms of DI implementation in English language skills development courses. Table 5 presents the student- and lecturer-reported practices of DI in order to show how differentiation was enacted in classroom activities, instructional materials, learning products, and learning environment.

Table 5*Methods and Forms of Differentiated Instruction in English Language Skills Development Courses*

Survey source	Item/dimension	Valid N	Mean	SD	Positive responses (N)	Positive responses (%)
Student survey	Assigning tasks with different levels of difficulty	207	2.99	1.23	81	39.1
	Providing additional support/extra challenge	207	3.13	1.09	78	37.7
	Organizing various learning activities	207	4.32	0.72	183	88.4
	Using multiple instructional materials	207	4.16	0.82	165	79.7
	Allowing students to choose different product formats	207	3.98	0.92	148	71.5
	Changing classroom space/atmosphere	207	3.68	1.1	123	59.4
Lecturer survey	Content differentiation (learning materials, knowledge)	18	3.28	1.02	7	38.9

Process differentiation (learning activities, instructional organization)	18	3.56	0.98	10	55.6
Product differentiation (assignments, assessment projects)	18	2.94	1.21	7	38.9
Learning environment differentiation (classroom space, learning atmosphere)	18	2.67	1.37	6	33.3

The findings indicate that DI in English language skills development courses was most clearly reflected in the use of varied classroom activities and instructional materials. From the students' perspective, organizing various learning activities was the most frequently reported practice, with 88.4% positive responses and the highest mean score ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.72$). This was followed by the use of multiple instructional materials (79.7%, $M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.82$). Allowing students to choose different product formats was also reported relatively positively (71.5%, $M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.92$). By contrast, practices more directly related to learner readiness were less evident, particularly assigning tasks with different levels of difficulty (39.1%, $M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.23$) and providing additional support or extra challenge (37.7%, $M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.09$).

The lecturers' responses showed a similar pattern. Among the four dimensions of differentiated instruction, process differentiation was the most frequently implemented, with 55.6% positive responses and the highest mean score ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.98$). Content differentiation and product differentiation were reported at lower levels, both with 38.9% positive responses, although content differentiation was rated slightly higher in mean score ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.02$) than product differentiation ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.21$). Learning environment differentiation was the least evident dimension, with 33.3% positive responses and the lowest mean score ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.37$). Overall, these findings suggest that DI in these courses was mainly enacted through process-oriented strategies, whereas more systematic differentiation across all four dimensions remained limited.

5.5. Factors Influencing the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction

This section addresses research question 3 by identifying the factors that constrained or facilitated the implementation of DI in English language skills development courses. The findings are presented from both students' and lecturers' perspectives in order to highlight the learner-, teacher-, and institutional-level conditions shaping DI implementation.

Table 6

Factors Influencing the Implementation of DI

Factor	Student: Strong influence (%)	Student: Some influence (%)	Lecturer: Strong influence (%)	Lecturer: Some influence (%)
Large class size	40.1	51.2	77.7	16.6
Lesson duration	20.7	57	61.1	33.3
Curriculum and examination pressure	36.2	45.4	61.1	27.7
Students' passive learning habits	41.5	44.4	–	–
Differences in students' proficiency levels within the same class	34.3	50.2	–	–
Inflexible classroom facilities	13.5	38.1	–	–
Teachers' awareness and beliefs	–	–	66.6	27.7
Professional qualifications and academic degrees	–	–	33.3	50

Personal interest and motivation	–	–	61.1	27.7
Teaching experience / years of service	–	–	55.5	33.3
Professional training and specialized workshops	–	–	16.6	77.7
Classroom management skills	–	–	55.5	44.4
Institutional and departmental policies	–	–	27.7	50
Collaborative culture and support among teachers	–	–	16.6	55.5
Teaching materials	–	–	72.2	27.7

* Note: Students: $n = 207$; lecturers: $n = 18$. “–” indicates that the factor was not included in that group’s questionnaire. Percentages may not total exactly 100 due to rounding.

The findings identify a wide range of factors that shaped the implementation of DI in English language skills development courses. These factors were at the student, teacher and institutional levels.

According to the students, the three factors that exerted the greatest influence on DI included large class size, students’ passive learning habits and diversity in proficiency levels within the same class. 91.3%, 85.9% and 84.5% of the students, respectively, believed that these factors strongly influenced or influenced the implementation of DI to a certain degree. Rigid curriculum and examination pressure (81.6%) and limited lesson duration (77.7%) were also reported to be significant barriers. From the students’ perspective, they primarily ascribed the difficulties of DI implementation to classroom realities and learner diversity.

Regarding lecturers, they pointed out numerous factors that hindered their DI implementation. From their perspectives, the most influential factors were teaching materials (99.9%), large class sizes (94.3%), teachers’ awareness and beliefs (94.3%), lesson duration (94.4%), and curriculum and examination pressure (88.8%). Besides, other barriers were associated with personal motivation, teaching experience and classroom management skills.

Overall, the findings show that both lecturers and students identified large class sizes and time pressure as major barriers to DI. Nevertheless, their perspectives differed significantly in other areas. While the students attributed DI difficulties to learner-related and classroom factors, the lecturers highlighted a combination of classroom, teacher and institutional factors.

5.6. Case Studies of Differentiated Instruction Implementation

5.6.1. Mini Portrait of Each Teacher

Teacher A delivered three listening and speaking lessons to the freshmen with greater emphasis on speaking skills while the students were required to complete the listening exercises in the textbook at home. The class consisted of 43 students majoring in English, with the levels ranging considerably from approximately B1 to C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Centering on communicative tasks, three lessons covered the topics of home comforts, favourite places and going green and were designed to boost the students’ fluency, interaction and the use of topic-related vocabulary. In terms of DI, teacher A modified content, process, product and learning environment in a systematic way. The students were grouped by their readiness levels (B1, B2 and C1) and then placed in mixed-level groups where higher-level students were encouraged to support their peers. Teacher A created one of the most clearly differentiated classroom profiles among the three samples.

Teacher B taught three listening and speaking lessons to a class of 24 English-majored sophomores. Similar to teacher A’s class, the students in teacher B’s class possessed varied language proficiency levels. Teacher B followed the structures and topics (i.e., learning for life, discoveries and inventions and the natural world) prescribed in the textbook and the speaking

handouts designed by her division. However, teacher B adapted the materials by designing two versions for two groups of students (weaker and stronger) with the stronger group required to deal with more cognitively demanding tasks. The students were asked to work with their peers of the same level first and later with those of the other level. Overall, teacher B manifested a consistent yet modest pattern of differentiation with few product types and classroom routines.

Teacher C taught three listening and speaking lessons to 40 first-year English majors. In the first lesson, teacher C followed the procedures in the textbook; nonetheless, the teacher decided to switch to more authentic materials in the next two lessons to stimulate the students' interest in the lessons. The teacher replaced the textbook activities with the film-based content: after the students watched a film, the teacher let them watch it again and paused at each sentence which needed to be translated into Vietnamese. The students had a chance to learn new vocabulary taken from the movies. Overall, although the shift to the movie-based approach allowed students to gain exposure to authentic language input, teacher C's approach was essentially "one-size-fits-all" as there were no discrepancies in materials, processes, products and learning environment to address student diversity.

The table below briefly summarizes each teacher's class context, their levels and patterns of DI across the four dimensions.

Table 7

Cross-Case Overview of Differentiated Instruction Implementation

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
Class context	Mixed-ability freshmen, speaking-focused listening-speaking lessons	Mixed-ability sophomores, textbook-based lessons with adapted handouts	First-year English majors, film-based lessons using common materials
Content differentiation	Clearly differentiated through tiered vocabulary, prompts, and language support based on readiness levels	Moderately differentiated through shared core content with adjusted handouts and support for different levels	Little evidence of differentiation; same materials and prompts for the whole class
Process differentiation	Strongly differentiated through flexible grouping, scaffolded tasks, and varied cognitive demands	Most clearly differentiated dimension, especially through grouping, scaffolding, and task adjustment	Limited differentiation; mainly whole-class instruction with few adjustments for learner differences
Product differentiation	Clearly differentiated through varied output expectations and, in some lessons, multiple presentation options	Present but limited, mainly through differences in task complexity rather than product choice	Little evidence of differentiated output; similar tasks and expectations for all students
Affect/Learning environment differentiation	Supportive and structured through predictable routines, readiness-based grouping, and peer support	Supportive through guided peer interaction and structured support	Positive and engaging atmosphere, but not clearly adapted to different learner needs
Overall pattern	Systematic and comprehensive DI	Moderate and selective DI	Engaging but largely uniform instruction

5.6.2. Content Differentiation Across Cases

Analyses of lesson plans and observations reveal that content differentiation varied considerably across the three teachers: teacher A displayed systematic and tiered content design; teacher B provided adaptive scaffolding of a shared core; teacher C adopted a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

Teacher A demonstrated the most proactive and structured approach to content differentiation. In the “Home Comforts” lesson, although all students worked towards the same objective, which is describing a favourite room, they were given different questions, vocabulary lists and useful language. The B1 group received simple, concrete vocabulary to describe furniture, feelings and basic room features. The B2 group was provided with higher-level vocabulary and collocations (e.g. airy, scented candles, cluttered desks) in order to describe atmosphere, design and emotional impacts. The C1 group was given abstract vocabulary and expressions (e.g. Its design mirrors my inner calm.) to describe emotional and aesthetic connections. In the “Going Green” lesson, despite retaining the topic from the core textbook, teacher A tiered learning outcomes for three groups of students. The B1 students were required to choose a topic and think of a simple definition, an opinion and its impact on their lives, supported by useful language and sentence starters. The B2 students had to discuss the benefits and drawbacks and its personal and community impacts. The C1 students dealt with the most sophisticated content, which involved giving an evaluation and discussing unintended consequences. In teacher A’s classes, multiple materials were provided to address students’ proficiency levels.

Teacher B also differentiated content, but teacher B’s approach was more adaptive, often involving modifying tasks and providing scaffolding around a common content core. In the pre-listening stage of the “Learning for Life” lesson, all the students were supposed to examine the same list of six factors they took into consideration when choosing a university. While the weaker students needed to rank their top three using sentence starters that teacher B provided, the stronger students had to rank all six factors and answer two additional questions about which factors were overrated or underrated and how their priorities had altered since high school. Nonetheless, the content in the while-listening and post-listening stages in this lesson remained unchanged for both groups of students. In the lessons on discoveries and inventions and the natural world, teacher B used two different handouts for two groups. The easier version contained concrete information, descriptive adjectives (e.g. peaceful, surrounded by, crystal-clear) and sentence starters whereas the more challenging version consisted of more demanding role cards or higher-level vocabulary (e.g., unspoiled, awe-inspiring, untouched by urbanisation) and reflective prompts about personal meaning and threats from development.

By contrast, Teacher C did not differentiate content. Across all three lessons, the teacher let all students watch the movies that had been selected by the teacher and asked them to answer a number of listening comprehension questions. Subsequently, the teacher paused at each utterance, had the students translate into Vietnamese and checked each sentence. Regarding the speaking activities, the teacher provided all the students with the same questions to discuss, the same vocabulary and useful language. The identical materials, tasks and lexical items were used for the whole class with no alternatives or tiered materials being observed.

In short, there were considerable differences in content differentiation. First, while teachers A and B made attempts to modify content, teacher C did not. Second, teachers A and B demonstrated two different models of content differentiation. Teacher A systematically adopted the tiered model, proactively designing multiple content streams while teacher B

mainly implemented the scaffolded model, using common content but varying task demands and providing strategic support.

5.6.3. Process Differentiation Across Cases

Like content differentiation, process differentiation was implemented differently across the three teachers.

Teacher A adopted a highly intentional approach to process differentiation, maximizing student engagement. In the “Home Comforts” lesson, teacher A designed a three-phase process. In the first place, the students worked in same-level groups, which enabled them to prepare ideas and language appropriate to their proficiency levels. The second phase shifted from homogeneous groups to heterogeneous groups where each student was set different tasks. After each description of a favourite room, it was the C1 students’ task to paraphrase and expand the B1 and B2 students’ ideas. To be more specific, after B1 students used sentence frames, the B2 students were encouraged to use comparisons (e.g. It’s more relaxing than ...) while the C1 students were challenged to use a metaphor (e.g. It feels like a warm hug after a long day). The final stage involved whole-class reflection during which the students shared ideas and new vocabulary items they learned from their peers. Likewise, in the “Going Green” lesson, teacher A made the students practise speaking in two rounds. They worked with the same-level partners first before moving on to work in mixed-level pairs. Besides flexible grouping, teacher A also differentiated the cognitive process by asking the students to engage with the same materials in different ways. In the “Home Comforts” lesson, based on the same audio file, the teacher set three different requirements: the B1 students listened and had to fill in five gaps with missing words or phrases; the B2 students had to fill in twenty gaps; the C1 students were given blank pages of paper and had to note down as much as possible what they heard.

Teacher B’s process differentiation was also varied. In the “Learning for Life” listening lesson, the students initially worked individually, listening and matching the university courses and their future security. Besides completing the task in the textbook, the stronger students were required to identify and take note of the evidence from the audio. Subsequently, the teacher regrouped the students into mixed-level pairs where the stronger students helped their weaker partners to understand the answers more deeply. This process transformed the listening exercise into a collaborative learning opportunity with peer support. In the “Discoveries and Inventions” lesson, the students were grouped homogeneously. The stronger groups engaged in a panel discussion on whether teleportation would change their lives for better or worse, and each of them represented a different perspective (i.e. the scientist, ethicist and economist). For weaker groups, they took part in a role-play activity, going on a tour of the gallery with clear structures and useful language provided. So, the same core content was processed in different ways based on student readiness.

Teacher C, however, did not differentiate the process in the lessons, and whole-class instruction dominated in the lessons. The students primarily worked individually, watching the films and answering the comprehension questions by themselves. Although the teacher held pair discussions during the speaking lessons, groupings were not deliberate to address students’ diverse needs in the class.

To sum up, process differentiation was observed in teachers A and B’s classes, yet not observed in teacher C’s. And when process differentiation was manifested, flexible grouping was the most commonly adopted strategy. Both teacher A and teacher B grouped the students homogeneously first for skill building and then heterogeneously for peer sharing and interaction.

5.6.4. Product Differentiation Across Cases

In addition to the three teachers' differences in content and process differentiation, product differentiation was also implemented at various levels.

Teacher A implemented systematic product differentiation both by varying the complexity of the students' products and by offering the students different choices. In the "Home Comforts" lesson, although the format of the product, a spoken description, was identically the same, the students were expected to perform differently in terms of depth, complexity and language. The B1 students were expected to produce simple sentences using basic language. The B2 students were expected to give a more sophisticated description, explaining what made the room comfortable and how it helped them unwind. The C1 students were supposed to produce the most sophisticated description, explaining how the design or the atmosphere of the room reflected their personality. More importantly, teacher A provided the whole class with a speaking assessment rubric. The assessment rubric clarified five criteria, including fluency, lexical resources, pronunciation, content and interaction on a scale from 1 to 5. This rubric, although uniform, allowed differentiated assessment by specifying different levels of performance. In the "Favourite Places" lesson, teacher A offered the students a range of options they could select to describe their favourite places. The options included giving an oral presentation, composing a song, painting or taking photos with brief captions, which allowed them to demonstrate their abilities in their preferred styles.

Unlike teacher A, teacher B differentiated products merely by varying the complexity of the tasks. In the "Discoveries and Inventions" lesson, the students were placed into same-level groups to take part in a speaking task as a post-listening activity. The weaker students' products were a guided tour explanation with a focus on facts whereas the stronger students engaged in a panel discussion from different perspectives. The stronger students' task was more challenging since they had to defend their opinions, respond to counter-arguments and convince others. In this case, the products were different not only in nature but also in complexity. In the "Natural World" lesson, the products for both groups of students were in the format of monologues, yet at different complexity levels. The weaker students needed to describe a place using concrete information whereas the stronger students were expected to include not just description but also personal reflection and evaluation.

In teacher C's lessons, all students were required to complete the same oral tasks, and there was no evidence of tiered products or choice in product formats.

In summary, product differentiation was observed in teachers A's and B's lessons while it was absent in teacher C's lessons. Two strategies to modify the products recorded were adjusting output expectations and offering different product options with the former being more commonly used.

5.6.5. Affect/Environment Differentiation Across Cases

Teacher A created a supportive and collaborative learning environment. The students knew what they were expected to do: they would start by working with their partners of the same level to acquire vocabulary, brainstorm and share ideas, and then they would work with other partners from other level groups for the main tasks before they joined the whole-class reflection. These predictable group arrangements might have helped alleviate anxiety, especially for weaker students who might feel unsure of expectations or lack necessary language to express their ideas. Additionally, these flexible groupings, together with the nature of the tasks, fostered collaboration among students.

Similar to teacher A, teacher B created a supportive learning environment. The teacher used pair and group work systematically in the lessons in which the stronger students provided support for the weaker ones. For instance, in the “Learning for Life” lesson, the stronger students were paired with the weaker students, comparing their answers to the listening exercise and explaining them to the weaker students if necessary. Also, the teacher created different learning environments within one class with sufficient support. In the “Discoveries and Inventions” lesson, the weaker students participated in the role-play activity, and they were supported by clear instructions and useful language. The stronger students, despite taking part in a challenging debate, received support through the role cards with suggested key points to discuss and useful phrases.

Teacher C was inclined to create a relaxing and enjoyable environment. Instead of using ready-made materials from the textbook, the teacher designed film-based tasks for the students with a view to maintaining student engagement and increasing student interest. Relaxing and engaging as the learning environment might have been, it remained uniform. There was no evidence of learning environment differentiation to address student varied needs.

In summary, learning environment differentiation was observed in teachers A and B’s lessons through predictable routines and peer support. Teacher C’s classes, although engaging and enjoyable, did not demonstrate environment differentiation.

6. Discussion

The findings reveal three closely related issues in the implementation of DI in English language skills development courses for English majors at HNUE: conceptual ambiguity, uneven enactment, and multi-layered constraints. These issues suggest that in this context, DI is valued in principle more strongly than it is enacted as a systematic classroom practice.

The first issue concerns lecturers’ conceptual understanding of DI. Although both lecturers and students generally perceived DI as pedagogically necessary, the findings suggest that some lecturers could not distinguish DI from full individualization. A large proportion of lecturers agreed that DI means creating completely separate lesson plans for each student, which reflects a degree of conceptual confusion. However, DI is generally understood as the flexible adaptation of teaching within a shared classroom context rather than the preparation of entirely separate instruction for individual learners (Gregory, 2013; Tomlinson, 2001). This finding indicates that although the lecturers are familiar with the term “differentiated instruction”, their understanding of its pedagogical meaning is not always precise.

The second issue is the gap between belief and practice. Although 88.8% of lecturers perceived DI as very necessary or necessary, only 33.3% reported implementing it in all lessons or on a frequent basis, while 50% stated that they applied it only in certain lessons or activities. This pattern suggests that although the lecturers value DI, they do not implement it consistently in their classroom practice. Similar gaps between teachers’ positive attitudes towards DI and their actual classroom practices have been reported in previous studies (Nayman & Altun, 2022; Gibbs, 2023). The finding implies that raising awareness of DI is important, yet insufficient. What matters is whether such awareness leads to regular practice.

The third issue concerns how DI was enacted and constrained in these courses. The findings show that content and process differentiation were more commonly implemented, whereas product and learning environment differentiation remained less systematic. The case study analysis further revealed different levels of DI enactment across classrooms: Teacher A implemented DI in a systematic and comprehensive manner; teacher B demonstrated a more

moderate and selective pattern, and teacher C largely maintained a one-size-fits-all approach despite creating a positive and engaging classroom atmosphere. Also, both lecturers and students identified large class size and limited lesson duration as major constraints. In addition, although students tended to emphasize learner-related difficulties, lecturers highlighted professional and institutional conditions. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that DI is shaped by the interaction of student-related, teacher-related, and institution-related factors rather than by a single barrier (Nayman & Altun, 2022; Gibbs, 2023; Ziernwald et al., 2022). This pattern is also consistent with higher-education DI research, which shows that large class size, time pressure, and uneven pedagogical support make DI difficult to sustain in university settings (Turner et al., 2017; Subban et al., 2025). This study not only confirms previously reported barriers, but it also provides a clear picture of how DI is enacted in university ELT by identifying three different implementation patterns: systematic and comprehensive differentiation, moderate and selective differentiation, and engaging but largely uniform instruction.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the implementation of DI in English language skills development courses for English majors at HNUE from both lecturers' and students' perspectives. The findings reveal that although both teachers and students perceived DI as necessary, its implementation remained uneven. In addition, DI was not enacted consistently across lessons. Another important finding is that content and process were visible in the classrooms whereas product and learning environment differentiation were less evident.

The research also demonstrates that the lecturers' understanding of DI was generally positive; however, this understanding was not always accurate. Specifically, there was bafflement between DI and full individualization. Besides, the study also points out a number of factors influencing the implementation of DI, including large class sizes, differences in students' language proficiency levels, time pressure, teaching materials and a rigid curriculum. These findings suggest that DI in university ELT should be interpreted as a necessary, yet still developing pedagogical practice.

To recapitulate, this study provides empirical evidence on DI in higher education, a context that has received little attention in Vietnam. It suggests that improving DI in English language skills development courses requires not only lecturers' understanding of learner diversity but also a clearer conceptual understanding. More supportive teaching conditions are also required to make DI implementation more effective and sustainable.

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