



APPLYING DIFFERENTIATION IN BUSINESS ENGLISH EFL CLASSROOMS: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO ENHANCING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND PROFESSIONAL READINESS

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Abstract: In the diverse and dynamic context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly in Business English courses at the university level, differentiation stands out as a critical strategic management principle. By tailoring teaching strategies to accommodate varied learner needs, differentiation enhances language acquisition, fosters engagement, and prepares students for professional success in global business environments. This article explores the theoretical foundations, practical applications, and strategic benefits of differentiation in Business English EFL classrooms, with a focus on customizing content, processes, and assessments to address diverse proficiency levels, cultural backgrounds, and career aspirations. A proposed case study illustrates how differentiation can be implemented in a future Business English course, offering a model for educators to optimize learning outcomes and align with industry demands.

Keywords: Differentiation, EFL classroom, strategic approach, professional readiness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Business English, a specialized branch of EFL, equips university students with the linguistic and professional competencies required for global workplaces, including skills in writing reports, negotiating contracts, and delivering presentations. However, EFL classrooms are inherently diverse, with students varying in language proficiency, learning styles, cultural perspectives, and career goals. The strategic management principle of differentiation—adapting strategies to deliver unique value (Porter, 1985)—is ideally suited to address this diversity. In education, differentiation involves customizing content (what students learn), process (how they learn), and product (how they demonstrate learning) to meet individual needs (Tomlinson, 2014). This article examines how differentiation can transform Business English EFL

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classrooms into inclusive, engaging, and career-focused learning environments, proposing a case study to demonstrate its practical application in a future course.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Differentiation is grounded in educational and strategic theories that emphasize individualized value creation. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) posits that learning is most effective when tasks are slightly beyond a learner's current ability but achievable with tailored support (Vygotsky, 1978). In EFL, this translates to scaffolding techniques like sentence starters or peer collaboration, adjusted to individual proficiency levels. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1983) further supports differentiation by recognizing diverse learner strengths (e.g., linguistic, visual-spatial, interpersonal), which can be leveraged in Business English tasks such as role-plays or visual presentations. From a strategic perspective, differentiation aligns with Porter's competitive advantage framework, where unique value delivery—here, customized learning experiences—ensures superior outcomes (Porter, 1985).

Empirical research validates differentiation's efficacy in EFL settings. Richards and Rodgers (2014) argue that learner-centered approaches, including differentiation, enhance motivation and engagement by addressing individual needs. Alavinia and Farhady (2012) found that differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms improved vocabulary acquisition and oral fluency, particularly in mixed-ability groups. Additionally, a study by Santangelo and Tomlinson (2012) demonstrated that differentiation fosters self-efficacy, critical for language learners navigating complex professional tasks. These findings underscore differentiation's potential to bridge proficiency gaps and prepare students for industry demands.

2.1. Strategic Importance of Differentiation in Business English

Business English courses are uniquely positioned to benefit from differentiation due to their focus on practical, profession-oriented skills. Students must master diverse competencies, from drafting emails to conducting cross-cultural negotiations, often under time constraints. Differentiation ensures these skills are taught in ways that resonate with learners' abilities and aspirations, maximizing engagement and retention. For example, a student aiming for a logistics role may prioritize supply chain terminology, while another targeting marketing may focus on persuasive communication. By aligning content with career goals, differentiation enhances relevance and motivation.

Moreover, differentiation supports cross-cultural competence, a critical skill in global business. EFL classrooms often include students from varied cultural backgrounds, and Business English tasks like negotiations or presentations require sensitivity to cultural norms (e.g., indirect communication in Asian business contexts). Differentiation allows instructors to incorporate culturally relevant scenarios, preparing students for real-world interactions. This strategic alignment with industry needs positions differentiation as a cornerstone of effective Business English instruction.

2.2. Applying Differentiation in Business English EFL Classrooms

Implementing differentiation requires intentional planning across three dimensions: content, process, and product. Below are expanded strategies, informed by the theoretical and empirical foundations, to guide educators in Business English EFL settings:

- **Content Differentiation:**
 - o **Tiered Materials:** Provide resources at varying complexity levels to match proficiency. For instance, beginners might use simplified business emails, while advanced learners analyze authentic financial reports or TED Talks on leadership. This ensures all students engage with meaningful content within their ZPD.
 - o **Career Relevance:** Tailor topics to students' professional goals. For industrial management students, content might focus on supply chain logistics, while marketing majors explore branding strategies. Incorporating industry-specific case studies (e.g., a negotiation with a multinational supplier) enhances applicability.
 - o **Cultural Integration:** Embed culturally relevant scenarios to reflect students' contexts or target markets. For example, a negotiation task might contrast direct Western communication with relationship-focused Asian approaches, fostering cultural awareness.
- **Process Differentiation:**
 - o **Flexible Grouping:** Alternate between homogeneous (same proficiency) and heterogeneous (mixed proficiency) groups. Homogeneous groups allow targeted instruction, such as vocabulary drills for beginners, while heterogeneous groups promote peer learning, with advanced students modeling fluency.
 - o **Scaffolding Techniques:** Provide structured support like sentence starters for writing tasks or role-play scripts for oral practice, gradually reducing assistance as students gain confidence. Advanced learners can tackle open-ended tasks, such as designing a marketing pitch.
 - o **Active Learning:** Incorporate varied activities—think-pair-share, simulations, or debates—to cater to different learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic). For example, visual learners might analyze infographics, while kinesthetic learners participate in role-plays.
- **Product Differentiation:**
 - o **Varied Assessments:** Offer multiple ways to demonstrate learning, such as written reports, oral presentations, or video pitches. This accommodates diverse strengths and builds confidence. For instance, a shy student might prefer a written proposal, while an outgoing student opts for a presentation.
 - o **Individualized Goals:** Set personalized objectives, such as mastering 20 business terms for a beginner or improving pronunciation for an advanced learner. This fosters ownership and measurable progress.
 - o **Authentic Outputs:** Design assessments that mirror workplace tasks, such as drafting a contract or presenting a business plan, to bridge classroom learning and professional demands.
- **Technology Integration:**
 - o **Digital Tools:** Use language apps (e.g., Duolingo for Business) for vocabulary practice or virtual platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams) for simulated negotiations, catering to tech-savvy learners and replicating remote work environments.
 - o **Interactive Platforms:** Tools like Kahoot or Padlet enable collaborative learning, with quizzes or discussion boards tailored to proficiency levels. For example, beginners might match terms to definitions, while advanced students create sentences.

- **Data-Driven Insights:** Leverage learning management systems to track progress and adjust instruction, ensuring differentiation remains responsive to student needs.
- **Teacher Role and Professional Development:**
 - **Facilitator Mindset:** Teachers act as facilitators, diagnosing learner needs through formative assessments (e.g., quizzes, observations) and adapting strategies dynamically.
 - **Training Needs:** Effective differentiation requires skills in curriculum design and cultural competence. Universities should invest in workshops on differentiated instruction and industry trends to equip instructors.

2.3. Benefits and Challenges

Differentiation offers significant benefits for Business English EFL classrooms:

- **Enhanced Engagement:** By addressing individual needs, differentiation boosts motivation and reduces disengagement, particularly for lower-proficiency learners.
- **Improved Outcomes:** Tailored instruction accelerates language acquisition, as evidenced by studies showing gains in vocabulary and fluency (Alavinia & Farhady, 2012).
- **Professional Readiness:** Career-focused content and authentic tasks prepare students for workplace demands, from cross-cultural communication to technical writing.
- **Inclusivity:** Differentiation ensures all learners, regardless of proficiency or background, feel valued and supported, fostering a positive classroom culture.

Challenges include:

- **Time Intensity:** Designing tiered materials and assessments requires significant planning, particularly for large classes.
- **Teacher Expertise:** Instructors may need training to implement differentiation effectively, especially in integrating technology or cultural elements.
- **Resource Constraints:** Limited access to authentic materials or digital tools can hinder implementation, particularly in under-resourced institutions.

To address these, universities can provide professional development, create shared resource banks (e.g., case study templates), and invest in affordable technologies like open-source platforms.

3. PROPOSED CASE STUDY: DIFFERENTIATION IN A BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE FOR ENGINEERING MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

3.1. Context

This case study is designed for a future Business English course at the Technical Faculty in Bor, tailored for Engineering Management students at CEFR levels B1 to B2. The course prepares students for careers in Bor's copper industry, particularly with Serbia Zijin Copper, a subsidiary of China's Zijin Mining Group. Students are expected to collaborate with Chinese professionals in roles such as supply chain management, project coordination, or operations, requiring proficiency in industry-specific English and cross-cultural communication skills.

3.2. Objective

To implement a differentiated instructional unit titled “Drafting and Presenting a Project Proposal for Serbia Zijin Copper” that enhances student engagement, addresses varying proficiency levels, and aligns with career aspirations in engineering management. The unit leverages differentiation strategies to ensure inclusivity and practical relevance for future industry roles.

3.3. Differentiation Plan

- Content

- **Materials:** The unit focuses on preparing a project proposal for upgrading equipment at Serbia Zijin Copper’s Veliki Krivelj mine. B1 students receive a 1-page case study with simplified terminology (e.g., “equipment cost,” “project timeline”) and a glossary of 15 key terms. B2 students work with a 2-page case study incorporating advanced vocabulary (e.g., “capital expenditure,” “operational efficiency”) and insights into Chinese business practices, such as prioritizing long-term partnerships.
- **Career Relevance:** Content is tailored to engineering management roles, emphasizing project planning, budgeting, and technical communication. The case study includes real-world scenarios, such as proposing a conveyor system upgrade, to mirror workplace tasks.
- **Cultural Relevance:** The materials highlight Serbia-China business dynamics, such as Serbia’s focus on cost-effective solutions and Zijin’s emphasis on relationship-building, using excerpts from Zijin’s project management guidelines.

- Process

- **Grouping:** The unit begins with mixed-proficiency groups for brainstorming project ideas, and encouraging peer learning. Later, proficiency-based groups focus on targeted tasks: B1 students practice structured proposal outlines, while B2 students develop detailed proposals incorporating technical and cultural considerations.
- **Scaffolding:** B1 students receive templates for proposal sections (e.g., budget summary) and flashcards for technical terms. B2 students are guided to use formal, diplomatic language (e.g., “We propose a mutually beneficial solution”) to reflect Chinese business etiquette.
- **Technology:** Kahoot hosts vocabulary quizzes (basic for B1, advanced for B2), and Microsoft Teams simulates virtual project meetings, replicating Zijin’s remote collaboration practices. Interactive tools like Padlet allow students to share proposal drafts for peer feedback.

- Product

- **Assessments:** B1 students submit a 250-word written project proposal summary, using a provided template. B2 students deliver a 5-minute oral presentation pitching their proposal to Zijin’s management, addressing technical specifications and cultural factors.
- **Individualized Goals:** B1 students aim to master 15 technical terms, while B2 students focus on improving clarity and professionalism in spoken English.
- **Authentic Outputs:** Assessments mirror workplace tasks, such as drafting proposals or presenting to stakeholders, to bridge academic learning with professional demands.

3.4. Implementation Plan

The unit spans three 90-minute sessions:

- **Session 1:** Introduce the case study, build vocabulary through Kahoot quizzes, and brainstorm proposal ideas in mixed-proficiency groups.
- **Session 2:** Conduct proficiency-based tasks, including drafting proposal sections and practicing presentations, with a mock project meeting on Teams.
- **Session 3:** Host a final virtual presentation session and collect assessments (written summaries or oral pitches).

3.5. Expected Outcomes

- **Engagement:** Students are expected to show increased motivation, with B1 learners gaining confidence in technical writing and B2 learners appreciating the challenge of professional presentations.
- **Skill Development:** B1 students should improve technical vocabulary recognition by 20-25%, while B2 students enhance fluency and cross-cultural communication skills.
- **Professional Readiness:** The unit prepares students for interactions with Zijin, equipping them with skills for drafting proposals and presenting to international stakeholders.
- **Teacher Insights:** The instructor will assess the effectiveness of differentiation, noting areas for improvement, such as simplifying templates or expanding cultural content.

4. DISCUSSION POTENTIAL

The case study will be used to facilitate classroom discussions on how differentiated materials, grouping strategies, and assessments impacted learning. Students will reflect on how these approaches prepare them for engineering management roles with Serbia Zijin Copper, fostering awareness of their professional development.

4.1. Strategic Implications for Universities

The proposed case study highlights differentiation's role in aligning Business English instruction with industry needs. Universities can adopt this approach by:

- **Curriculum Design:** Integrate differentiation into EFL programs, emphasizing career-focused content and cross-cultural skills.
- **Faculty Development:** Offer training on differentiation, focusing on practical tools like tiered assessments and technology integration.
- **Industry Partnerships:** Collaborate with local employers (e.g., Zijin) to develop authentic case studies, ensuring relevance and employability.
- **Technology Investment:** Provide access to platforms like Teams or Kahoot to support interactive, differentiated learning.

By embedding differentiation, universities can position their Business English programs as strategic assets, producing graduates who are linguistically proficient and professionally competitive.

5. CONCLUSION

Differentiation is a transformative strategic tool for Business English EFL classrooms, enabling educators to address diverse learner needs while fostering professional competence. By customizing content, processes, and assessments, instructors can create engaging, inclusive environments that prepare students for global business contexts. The proposed case study for Technical Faculty in Bor illustrates how differentiation can be applied to a specific industry context, equipping students for careers with Serbia Zijin Copper. Universities should invest in teacher training, resource development, and industry partnerships to maximize differentiation's impact, ensuring EFL programs deliver unique value in an increasingly competitive educational landscape.

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