

Differentiated Learning Instruction: Its Effects on Students' Oral English Fluency

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Abstract

The study aimed to determine the effects of using differentiated learning instruction on students' oral English fluency. It utilized quasi-experimental method using pre-test-post-test one group design. The Job Enabling English Proficiency Accelerate 4 (JEEP 4) students Section 12 of the Mindanao State University – Maguindanao enrolled in the second semester of the Academic Year 2013-2014 were chosen as subjects of the study.

The instrument covered four specific areas -- Sentence Reading, Reading and Pronunciation, Comprehension and Structure, Sentence Repetition. The mean was used to describe students' oral English fluency. The z-test was also utilized to determine the significant difference between the oral English fluency levels of the students after utilizing the differentiated learning instruction. The z-test was set at a 0.05 level of significance.

The following are the summary of the findings:

1. The oral English fluency level of the students as indicated by their pre-test mean score is 51.75 (1.5) described as Advanced Elementary Level.
 2. The oral English fluency level of the students in their post-test as indicated by their mean score is 63.44 (2.0) described as Low Intermediate level.
 3. There exists a significant difference between the students' pre-test and post-test mean scores as indicated by a higher computed z-value of 2.71 as compared to the tabular z-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance.
- It is concluded based on the findings that the differentiated learning instruction is effective in enhancing students' oral English fluency. Instructional materials with differentiated learning instruction were then constructed as the research output.

KEYWORDS: Job Enabling English Proficiency, English Fluency, differentiated learning instruction

INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult challenges in teaching English is finding effective ways to help students improve their oral fluency. Large mixed-ability classes, little exposure to the English language after class and tongue-tied students inevitably form obstacles to teaching. How to arouse students' commitment to speak English fluently and get their maximum participation have long been a problem for teachers who want to get the students involved in class activities and keep the class lively and dynamic.

The teachers are cynical whether or not the methods they use in their classes could keep up with the standards of a good and effective teaching procedure considering a mixture of students they have in the classroom. Teachers want to perfect English language learning in speaking so they require their students to practice in the open air where sounds are freely transmitted.

Recent researches show that fluency of students has been declining due to various factors. Observers have attributed the decline in English skills in our country to budgetary constraints and

lack of proper infrastructure in the country's educational system. The formal educational system is hard-pressed to train young Filipinos in oral English fluency so the private sector has taken the lead. This gave birth to USAID's Job Enabling English Proficiency (JEEP) through its Growth and Equity in Mindanao (GEM) program to generate awareness and support for English language use. JEEP's main project components include a computerized English language training, testing and certification according to international standards.

To address the problem that many of the young people graduating from colleges in Mindanao have, JEEP was introduced to improve students who do not have the English language skills required to gain employment in some of the sectors that tend to offer the most opportunity, such as nursing and allied health services, the maritime sector, travel and tourism services, and other areas of local employment requiring proficiency in English.

As educators have grappled with this issue, it became clear that educational parity can only be achieved if English language learners have an opportunity to learn the same rigorous academic content as native English speakers. The best way to achieve that goal is through differentiated instruction that takes into account students' English language proficiency, as well as the many other factors that can impact learning (Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010).

Differentiated learning instruction, according to Tomlison as cited by Ellis, Gable, Greg, & Rock (2008), is the process of ensuring that what a student learns, how he or she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he or she has learned is a match for the student's readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning. Differentiated learning instruction encourages educators to look at teaching and learning in a new way. This is an approach that gives emphasis on the phrase "One size doesn't fit all". Students must be seen as individuals. While students are assigned to different grade levels by age, they differ in their readiness to learn, their interests, and their style of learning.

In teaching the Job Enabling English Proficiency Accelerate 4, the teachers' main focus is communication practice which highlights the development among students' oral fluency. In doing so, teachers activate students to communicate, not only deliver information or

lectures. Students' primary focus is on discourse level of communicating whole texts, not isolated sentences. In this kind of tasks, the teachers aspire to have all of their students learn. This aspiration of reaching all students spans discipline, age for levels, and all varieties of institutions. Most teachers do so out of a genuine love for their discipline and a desire to share the wonder of their chosen field with others. Teaching English is no different than other disciplines in this respect.

The JEEP 4 classes at Mindanao State University – Maguindanao are a mixture of students with different horizons and intelligences. Most of the activities sometimes become boring to the students since most of the tasks are often repeated. Teachers use several modules, but they have problems on how they could contextualize the lessons because these modules are in the foreign settings. The researcher deems it important that the students could not only relate to the activities, but it will also establish connections where lessons are made between the curriculum, student interests, and students' previous learning. Moreover, the researcher believes that there should be a on-going assessment to help plan effective instruction.

This study is affixed from various compilations of many theories and practices. Based on review, differentiated instruction, the "package" itself is lacking empirical validation. There is an acknowledged and decided gap in the literature in this area and future research is warranted.

According to the proponents of differentiation, the principles and guidelines are rooted in years of educational theory and research. For example, differentiated instruction adopts the concept of "readiness". That is the difficulty of skills taught should be slightly in advance of the child's current level of mastery. This is grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978), and the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the range at which learning takes place. The classroom research by Fisher et al. (1980) strongly supports the ZPD concept. The researcher found that in classrooms where individuals were performing at a level of about 80% accuracy, students learned more and felt better about themselves and the subject area under study (Fishes, 1980 in Tomlison, 2000).

Other practices noted as central to differentiation have been validated in the effective teaching research conducted from the mid 1980's to the present. These practices should include effective management procedures, grouping students for

instruction, and engaging learners (Ellis and Worthington, 1994).

While no empirical validation of differentiated instruction as a package was found, there are a numerous number of testimonials and classroom examples authors of several publications and websites provide while describing differentiated instruction. Tomlison (2001) reports individual cases of settings in which the full model of differentiation was very promising. The teachers using differentiation have written about improvements in their classrooms.

Much more studies on this issue found out that mild to massive failures in the acquisition of fluency are consequently not uncommon and persist despite even prolonged exposure to the target language. This rather spectacular lack of success as periodically noted, tends to be traced to limitation in the methodology, instruction, especially to the confines of the classroom. This is where the role of differentiation takes place. By doing so, a teacher can give immediate attention by establishing a framework to make the components of fluency explicit through individualized instruction which deviates to the principle of "one-size-fits-all" since no two students are exactly in the same level towards mastery of the language. It is rooted from these principles that the researcher considers this study significant.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter contains the methodology: subjects of the study, data gathering procedures, research instrument, and research design.

Subjects of the Study

A total of thirty-two (32) students of the Job Enabling English Proficiency Accelerate 4 (JEEP 4) section 12 of the Mindanao State University – Maguindanao who were officially enrolled during the second semester of Academic Year 2013-2014 are chosen as subjects of the study. The JEEP 4 class is selected as the subjects since the subject concentrates about developing oral fluency among students. The majority of the students are coming from the College of Public Affairs under the Social Work department.

Data Gathering Procedures

The researcher initially sent a letter addressed to the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs of the Mindanao State University – Maguindanao to ask permission regarding the conduct of the study in the said institution as well as to allow the researcher to use the speaking test as the

instrument of the study. The same letter was also sent to Dynamic Education to allow the use of the speaking test.

Two weeks were allotted for the class meetings, which was equivalent to six (6) meetings. The class met for an hour each day (1:00-2:00 pm) every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Before the intervention, the pre-test was administered a day ahead of the first meeting. The following weeks were the conduct of actual classes with the use of differentiated learning instruction. After the intervention, it was followed by giving the post-test. The students' mean scores on the pre-test and post-test were computed and the difference between the two mean scores was tested at 0.05 level of significance. The paper was then presented to the members of the thesis committee for further suggestions and polishing, and the output is formulated based on the result of the study.

Statistical Treatment of the Data

The data gathered are tallied and tabulated to facilitate the data analysis and interpretation. In answering the problems 1 and 2 which described the oral English fluency level of the students in speaking test before and after the application of differentiated learning instruction, the frequency count, percentage, and mean were used.

The z-test for dependent samples is an additional statistical tool used to determine the significant difference between the students' pre-test and post-test mean scores. The level of significance was set at 0.05 level. All the statistical computations were done with the aid of scientific calculator.

Research Instrument

The speaking test of the Job Enabling English Proficiency program was utilized as the instrument of the study. This particular test includes a pre-test and a post-test which focuses on two areas of task, reading and repetition.

The speaking test helps determine oral fluency level. Used together with the placement test, it provides a good indication of where students are in terms of language progression found in DynEd courses. Like most other tests however, the test requires reasonable test-taking skills and a level of concentration that must be sustained throughout the test. Therefore, it is possible that some test takers, including native speakers, may not score well on the test.

DynEd's Speaking Test uses advanced speech recognition technology. It must be given in a controlled environment where external or

background noise is minimal, and where a suitable microphone is used. Students should also have a brief orientation about the test and must take the Practice Test at least once to familiarize themselves with the test format. If they cannot complete the Practice Test after several attempts, they should not take the Speaking Test. This may indicate that: (1) there is a problem with room noise, microphone, or the person's voice and/or (2) the person's English level is too low to take the test.

The Speaking Test now has two levels. Students whose Placement Test Level is less than 1.0, or who have not taken Placement Test, are automatically directed into the lower-level Speaking Test (0.0-1.0). Students whose Placement Test level is 1.0 or higher are automatically directed into the higher-level speaking test (1.0 – 2.7+).

In order to interpret the obtained pre-test and post-test scores of the students, the following score levels and their corresponding descriptions were adapted:

Range of Scores	Description
0.0	Beginner
0.5	Low Elementary
1.0	Elementary
1.5	Advanced Elementary
2.0	Low Intermediate
2.5	Intermediate
2.7	High Intermediate
3.0	Advanced
3.5	Advanced with Confidence

Research Design

This study utilized the quasi-experimental method using pre-test-post-test one group design. The subjects were given the pre-test in speaking test of the Job Enabling English Proficiency Program. After which, an intervention was conducted before the post-test was directed. This pattern is followed in order to determine the significant difference of the students' oral English fluency performance level in the speaking test after the intervention.

differentiated learning instruction. The data are presented in the form of frequency and percentage distribution and followed by textual discussions and corresponding interpretations.

The Table 1 shows the speaking test scores of the students. As shown on the table, the highest scores got by the students 18.75% which fall on the range of (73-84). This shows that there are six (6) out of 32 respondents who are classified under the intermediate level. These students belong to those who can already handle everyday information questions if the questions are spoken clearly and slowly. They can give directions and handle most daily situations, including normal business transactions independently.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Students' Oral English Performance Levels After the Differentiated Learning Instruction is Implemented

The data in Table 1 show the students' score level in oral fluency speaking test before the use of

Table 1

Range of Scores	Frequency	Percentage	Oral Fluency Level	Description
0-28	6	18.75	0.0	Beginner
29-36	2	6.25	1.0	Elementary
37-44	4	12.50	1.2	(In between Elementary and Advanced Level)
45-55	4	12.50	1.5	Advanced Elementary
56-59	0	0	1.7	(In between Advanced Elementary and Low Intermediate Level)
60-67	4	12.50	2.0	Low Intermediate

68-72	6	18.75	2.2	(In between Low Intermediate and Intermediate Level)
73-84	6	18.75	2.5	Intermediate
85-100	0	0	2.7 or higher	High Intermediate
	32	100		
Mean = 51.75 (Advanced Elementary)				

Legend:

Range of Scores	Description
0.0	Beginner
0.5	Low Elementary
1.0	Elementary
1.5	Advanced Elementary
2.0	Low Intermediate
2.5	Intermediate
2.7	High Intermediate
3.0	Advanced
3.5	Advanced with Confidence

The mean score of the students is 51.75%, described as Advanced Elementary level on the scale used. The result means that the majority of the students are on the level where they can only answer simple questions about the recent past and plans for immediate future. Their speech is usually slow and ungrammatical and/or limited to basic patterns. They are still unable to explain or understand details and abstract information. They can perform basic tasks and simple interactions, such as greeting someone, leaving a message, or buying something at a store. Their vocabulary is obviously limited to everyday things, places of business, and basic needs.

The results may be rooted from the fact that college students nowadays lack exposures to different activities that could enhance their oral fluency. In developing the oral fluency of the students, it is not enough that the students would just be leaving everything into the four corners of the classroom. In support to the DynEd's provision, oral fluency can only be achieved by taming the ear and the tongue of the students of the correct pronunciation and usage of words. Moreover, the students should be given chances to breakthrough their shells by giving them their comfort zones where they can express their ideas better. It is on the part of the teacher to be constantly on his feet to cultivate and bring out hidden potentials from the students by offering them different grounds, opportunities, and environment guided by the principle of differentiated instruction.

DynEd through its speaking test develops from the students common expressions used in an authentic situation, and as observed, these students actually bring these adapted conversations form the speaking test in their outside conversations. This is one of the best ways where they can improve their oral fluency.

The result was also attributed to the failure of the teachers in meeting the students' needs in terms of their readiness level, interest, and modes of learning. The typical JEEP 4 Accelerate class before the researcher had thought of doing an intervention was a kind of very indiscriminate class where the teacher becomes just a slave of the modules without considering the mixed-ability class that needs to be given individualized instruction. Worse than that, the modules are usually intended for foreign students who are learning the English as a foreign language. They are not contextualized so the students sometimes fail to comprehend the lessons or instructions given. Moreover, mild to massive failures in the acquisition of fluency are consequently not uncommon and persist despite even prolonged exposure to the target language. This rather spectacular lack of success, as periodically noted, tends to be traced to limitation in the methodology, instruction, especially to the confines of the classroom.

B. The Students' Oral English Performance Levels after the Differentiated Learning Instruction is Implemented The data presented in this section are the students' scores in the speaking

test after the differentiated learning instruction was used. It shows the frequency and percentage distribution of students' oral English fluency.

Table 2

Range of Scores	Frequency	Percentage	Oral Fluency Level	Description
0-28	1	3.12	0.0	Beginner
29-36	0	0	1.0	Elementary
37-44	2	6.25	1.2	(In between Elementary and Advanced Level)
45-55	4	12.50	1.5	Advanced Elementary
56-59	3	9.37	1.7	(In between Advanced Elementary and Low Intermediate Level)
60-67	7	21.88	2.0	Low Intermediate
68-72	7	21.88	2.2	(In between Low Intermediate and Intermediate Level)
73-84	8	25.00	2.5	Intermediate
85-100	0	0	2.7 or higher	High Intermediate
	32	100		
Mean = 63.44 (Low Intermediate)				

The data in the Table 2 shows that on the average, the students got the level of low intermediate as indicated by the mean score of 63.44 (2.0). Under this level, the students can already ask and answer most questions about simple sequences of events, life history, dates, time and pace of events, spatial relations, and causal relations, if the questions are spoken slowly and clearly. They can understand and express these basic ideas in complete sentences.

The improved scores of the students may be attributed to the use of differentiated learning instruction in implementing the lessons in the JEEP Accelerate 4 class. Throughout the intervention, the students were used to being interactive since most of the activities done were giving emphasis on the oral capacity of the students in producing sound and comprehending it. That is more likely what they have encountered upon taking the speaking test.

The improved scores of the students were also attributed to the repeated tasks on using differentiated learning instruction that offered a lot of listening activity which tamed the tongue and ear of the students. Repeated tasks served as a practice for the students which gradually grant them permanence throughout the entire intervention. It made them familiar with the sound

and correct pronunciation of words. The nature of the intervention gave way to one of the teacher's main targets which are to develop mastery and automaticity among students.

The increased scores have also been attributed to the fact that these students have often heard English accents on the activities given. On those particular tasks, accuracy and comprehension is the focus more than just producing speech. Activities such as role-play, group discussion, and other related activities done have encouraged them to think deeply in interacting with their classmates which have the same modes of learning as they do. It goes back as a support to the earlier mentioned claim by Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010) that educational parity specifically in the aspect of oral fluency can only be achieved if English language learners have an opportunity to learn the same rigorous academic content as native English speakers. Moreover, the result also probes several research studies which have demonstrated that students can identify their own learning styles when exposed to a learning instruction that matches their style. Students score higher in tests than those not taught in their learning style and it is advantageous to teach and test students in their preferred modalities (Dunn and Dunn, 1978).

C. The Comparison between Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores in Oral English Fluency

Matched Pairs	N	$\sum D$	$\sum D^2$	Computed Z-value	Description
Pre-test Score	32	414	27,924	2.71	Significant
Post-test Score					

Legend: z to be significant at 0.05 level should be at least ± 1.96 (two-tailed test)

Where:

$\sum D$ = the algebraic sum of the difference between the students' post-test and pre-test scores

$\sum D^2$ = the sum of squares of the difference between the students' post-test and pre-test scores

N = total number of students

The table 3 shows that there is a significant difference between the students' pre-test and post-test mean scores. This is indicated by a computed z-value of 2.71 which is greater than the tabular z-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. This means that the use of differentiated learning instruction in teaching the Job Enabling English Proficiency Accelerate 4 improved students' oral English fluency level.

As the result reveals a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores in oral English fluency level of the students, the findings clearly suggest that differentiated learning instruction is well received as a classroom practice that may be well taken as a means to improve the English oral fluency level of the students. It goes back as a support to the earlier mentioned claim by Fairbairn and Jones-Vo (2010) that educational parity can only be achieved if English language learners have an opportunity to learn the same rigorous academic content as native English speaker. The best way to achieve that goal is through differentiated instruction that takes into account students English language proficiency, as well as many other factors that can impact learning.

Based on the forgoing findings, the hypothesis claiming no significant difference between the oral English fluency performance levels of students in speaking test before and after the differentiated learning instruction was utilized is rejected.

The findings of this study manifested the claim of Guild (1994) about salient indicators that make sense for improving instruction and learning. He discovered that all students can be successful learner; all learners are successful when earning and instruction is channeled through their style

preferences and diverse teaching instructions are essential. It also manifested the research which shows that children reading aloud and receiving instruction from the teacher get far more instructional feedback than the students following along. Frequent opportunities to read aloud make sense for the improvement of oral fluency of the students. First, oral reading helps connect children with experiences they have had at home, school, or in authentic situations (Neumann and Dickinson, 2007).

Moreover, the findings suggest that devised lesson plans provide differentiated instruction that supports the reading research-based fluency and comprehension. Most of the proponents have agreed that to acquire oral fluency, students must have enough guided practice for reading to become automatic; therefore, rereading or repetition is the key to building oral fluency as it is practiced in taking the speaking test.

CONCLUSIONS

The following are the summary of the findings based on the careful analysis and scrutiny of the data gathered:

- The oral English fluency level of the students as indicated by their pre-test mean score is 51.75 (1.5) described as Advanced Elementary Level.
- The oral English fluency level of the students in their post-test as indicated by their mean score is 63.44 (2.0) described as Low Intermediate level.
- There exists a significant difference between the students' pre-test and post-test mean scores as indicated by a higher computed z-value of 2.71 as compared to the tabular z-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance.

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that the differentiated learning instruction is effective in enhancing students' oral English fluency. Therefore, oral English fluency can be best taught if they are presented based on the principles of differentiation and will be taught based on students' inclination.

The following recommendations were offered based on the findings of the study:

1. English subject is recommended to be taught using the principles of differentiated learning instruction to ensure more meaningful learning among the students.
2. The researcher encourages the school administration to send more teachers to seminars focusing on the strategies on how to reach students with mixed abilities that can be found in the principles of differentiated learning instruction.
3. Aside from the modules and books available in the English departments, the teachers should also come up with an idea of modifying some of the activities patterned to that of the principles of differentiated learning instruction to make it more relevant to the students' readiness level, interest, and modes of learning.
4. More researchers to conduct similar study are further recommended, especially using the model of differentiated learning instruction.

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