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The Usage of a Differentiated Instruction Strategy to Teach Heterogeneous English Groups in a  
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Cristopher Lopez Cerdas

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# The Usage of A Differentiated Instruction Strategy to Teach Heterogeneous English Groups in a Costa Rican Context

Cristopher Lopez Cerdas<sup>1</sup>

Universidad Nacional

Costa Rica

[cristopherlc@icloud.com](mailto:cristopherlc@icloud.com)

## Abstract

Heterogeneous groups, also called *mixed ability groups* or *classes*, are one of the most challenging student populations for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Currently, the lack of contextual research on the realities of heterogeneous groups in Costa Rica has created a need to collect important constructive aspects that could help teachers with heterogeneous groups. This paper, summarizes key guidelines that Costa Rican teachers can follow to initially understand what heterogeneous groups are and how to address them with a differentiated instruction (DI) approach while considering the students' needs, group work, a student-centered approach, and learning styles, to follow an informed path in teaching mixed ability students.

**Keywords:** differentiated instruction, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), heterogeneous groups

## Resumen

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<sup>1</sup> English Professor. Universidad Técnica Nacional and Universidad Latinoamericana de Ciencia y Tecnología. Bachelor's in English Teaching.

Los grupos heterogéneos, también llamados *grupos de habilidades mixtas*, son una de las poblaciones estudiantiles más desafiantes para los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera. Actualmente, la falta de investigación contextualizada sobre las realidades de los grupos heterogéneos en Costa Rica ha creado la necesidad de recopilar aspectos constructivos importantes que puedan ayudar a los profesores con grupos heterogéneos. En este ensayo, se ha desarrollado una guía resumen de aspectos claves que los profesores de Costa Rica puedan seguir, inicialmente para entender qué son los grupos heterogéneos y cómo afrontarlos al seguir un enfoque de instrucción diferenciada (ID) y al mismo tiempo considerar las necesidades de los estudiantes, el trabajo en grupo, el enfoque centrado en el estudiante y los estilos de aprendizaje para avanzar en un camino informado hacia la enseñanza de los estudiantes con habilidades mixtas.

**Palabras clave:** Instrucción diferenciada, Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE), grupos heterogéneos.

## **Introduction**

Heterogeneous or mixed-ability classes are one of the most challenging groups teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can face at schools. These particular groups are made-up of different English-level students. As uncanny as they may seem, these are also typical in the EFL environment, which brings with them many challenges for teachers when developing activities in the class for these students. Heterogeneous groups consist of mixed-ability students, which means that their proficiency varies from one learner to the other; some of them are not as fast at learning as the others. The development of English Language Teaching (ELT) in EFL classes is affected by the existence of these different learning proficiencies and students' needs. Grounded on some contemporary studies, teachers of English are undergoing

quandaries in pedagogy and producing materials to address mixed-ability groups (Gustiani, 2019).

Furthermore, some studies regarding EFL heterogeneous classes have been conducted about differentiated instruction (DI), group work, learning styles, and students' needs by Abduramanova (2021), Ashman et al. (2008), Cohen and Lotan (2014), Gustiani (2019), Hendricks (2016), Klang et al. (2022), Klingner et al. (1998), Kronberg et al. (1997), Meadows (2021), and Tomlinson, (2001). Most of these studies have been recent; however, some others are from 1997 and 1998 which have provided a broad understanding of heterogeneous groups' requirements, hence the need for them to be included in the discussion. Meadows' (2021) and Tomlinson's (2001) studies state that English heterogeneous classes increase the difficulties for teachers to focus on the target language learning process and the need of working together with the pupils with a student-focused approach to identify their needs and provide the best support they can have.

In Costa Rica, English teachers must deal with heterogeneous groups in which most of the activities performed do not address all the students' abilities. This causes the limitation of the students with lower levels' avoiding a smooth improvement process during the development of the course. On the contrary, this can result in boredom among the high level students. The reason for these problems may emerge from the activities' standardization inside the class that just reaches the needs of some levels, not considering all the students' mixed abilities. Having this in mind, this paper is intended to provide a view of some general approaches that can be used in Costa Rica's reality while pondering what has been researched in other countries. Furthermore, this will help guide other teachers in the pursuit of different strategies to teach heterogeneous groups and hopefully be able to open a path for further specialized research in this matter.

## **Differentiated Instruction**

Understanding the concept of Differentiated Instruction (DI) is imperative for the successful embodiment and development of this approach; hence, the importance of underlining a generalized concept for DI emerges. DI comprises methods of knowledge exchange so that the people involved can reduce or even eliminate the setbacks one can find while teaching heterogeneous groups. The instructions in this process are varied concerning the students' level and skills using tiered or collaborative tasks (Gustiani, 2018). Moreover, DI is more qualitative than quantitative as argued by Tomlinson (2001): "Many teachers incorrectly assume that differentiating instruction means giving some students more work to do, and others less" (p. 4); in addition, Tomlinson (2001) provided clear ideas on how we should divide the DI process which are the followings "(1) content—input, what students learn; (2) process—how students go about making sense of ideas and information; and (3) product—output, how students demonstrate what they have learned" (p. 4). He stated that when using this guideline, it will ease the development of DI for any specific activity in the English class, hence providing a smooth process in the acquisition of the target knowledge for each student even with different levels (Tomlinson, 2001).

Differentiated instruction does not come alone when being implemented in a class; DI is correlated with different processes, knowledge, and the understanding of students' needs to be fully developed in class. Cooperative learning, critical thinking, collaborative study reading techniques, and cultural diversity understanding are key components of a well-developed English heterogeneous class in which differentiated instructions could be used. In addition, identifying students' learning styles, modifying students' demands, and enabling various learning processes are some strategies that have been suggested for properly implementing DI because students are responsible for their own learning processes. Student-centered activities such as collaborative projects, tiered tasks, and mandatory in addition to optional chores are best suited for this strategy's implementation (Gustiani, 2018).

Having these elements will help the development of the class in a Costa Rican context. Costa Rica possesses a vast amount of students with different learning styles and backgrounds that requires a deep analysis of their needs for them to receive the required help, which can be accomplished by the usage of student-centered activities. The implementation and understanding of a student-centered approach will provide the opportunity for the students to be able to constantly follow and decide their learning process pace, thereby helping them to develop the assigned activities according to their level, which is the main idea of DI as well. As mentioned by Gustiani (2018), "other student-centered approaches like game competition, extra homework, and dramatization could be integrated to enhance the effectiveness of ELT processes in a heterogeneous class" (p. 304). Additionally, helping students to be the center of the learning process will improve their acquisition of knowledge and, as Gustiani stated, "to put the students as the center of the learning processes could optimize their power to their own learning habit" (Gustiani, 2018, p. 307).

Since the importance of differentiated instruction has been already stated as well as the student-centered activities included in this process, we have to keep in mind that a collaborative strategy is another key component when thinking of approaching heterogeneous classes and consequently using DI with these groups. The importance of applying any approach is to guarantee procedures and instructions that seek high-level discussion in the activities performed by the students. Although we know most of the students in a heterogeneous class have different levels, a collaborative approach will help them to be critical and have a high-level thinking development of any topic (Klingner, et al., 1998). Here is when the true self of DI comes to life. The questions or activities have to allow students to be critical and use their high-level thinking in their own way and at their own pace, hence the need for them to work collaboratively and help each other express their ideas (Klingner, et al., 1998). Additionally, it is imperative to uncover the students' interest when opening these spaces of collaborative learning so that they can be fully engaged in the process and therefore the modification that may be needed

depending on the development of the activities can be easily performed; as stated by Klingner et al. (1998), “when students lack background knowledge about a topic, teachers should conduct a whole-class preview prior to small-group work” (p. 17). This kind of learning approach will help and guide the students to interact in an academic way because it opens spaces for critical thinking in which the students are free to provide their opinion respectfully. Thus, this will lead to an improvement in their comprehension of the topics previously taught.

Furthermore, the importance of collaborative learning comes from its functionality and interdisciplinarity. The students who work cooperatively have the chance to listen to others’ points of view as well, which will help them grow. This is crucial even more in a Costa Rican environment when there are so many differences between our schools, high schools, and university populations. Opening discussion spaces for heterogeneous groups can increase not only the students’ skills but also their understanding of society. Consequently, as mentioned by Ashman et al. (2008), “this [may create] a change in the instructional activity in the classroom by giving students more responsibility for their work (p. 97).

With cooperative learning in mind, we have to take into account the different cultural backgrounds that can arise in a heterogeneous class. As mentioned by Hendricks (2016), “many classrooms are heterogeneous environments, filled with students from various races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses” (p. 3), which makes us have this in mind at the time of using differentiated instruction in class as well because of the need to specialize the class activities depending on the population to develop a successful and understanding classroom environment. It may not seem as clear at the moment, but the understanding of one background can help choose the correct way of accommodating some activities regarding one level: “Educators face challenges educating all students equally while also facing the element of shifting student demographics in public schools” (Hendricks, 2016, p. 12). The difficulty that language level heterogeneity, level skills and students’ realities bring at the time of activities’

accommodation or the implementation of DI are countless and continually increasing, and as stated by Kronberg et al. (1997),

Differentiated teaching and learning assumes that learning in today's world is a complex task. This assumption results in the design and delivery of learning processes that engage students in issues and challenges in which there are few clear answers but, rather, where differing perspectives are the norm and answers and solutions are often full of complexity and ambiguity. (p. 11)

This can allow the class to also be affluent in terms of world's standpoints, hence creating a space for self-questioning and understanding of the environment and people's reality. The complexity that heterogeneous groups bring to the class is approachable by allowing spaces for critical thinking and openness to improvement. Finding solutions is not often an easy path; however, through the implementation of some of the strategies mentioned before, this could be possible.

### **Teacher's and Students' Roles**

Along the same lines, a key aspect of the process comes to light, and this is the role of the teacher throughout the process and application of DI, which should be seen as that of a facilitator. Kronberg et al. (1997) stated that "the shift away from the teacher-as-expert model is essential. Differentiated teaching and learning assumes that learners will be active participants in determining what content is taught and how content is taught" (p. 12). In this sense, having the teacher as a facilitator will provide guidelines and feedback when needed. At the same time, the teachers should be reflective practitioners that are always ready to question the process and hence improve or look for opportunities for improvement: "As students become increasingly diverse, it becomes even more important for teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of curricular content and instructional design (Kronberg et al.,1997, p. 14).



Consequently, the students' role needs to be approached directly as well. This idea has already been mentioned before because of the emphasis on the student-centered approach, but it should be recognized that the need for using DI is increasing. It is ideal to explain directly to the students what is expected of them, which can be even more necessary in the context of Costa Rica; Kronberg et al. (1997) stated that "an essential role shift in differentiated classrooms focuses on students sharing more responsibility for learning, for both themselves and others, as well as becoming more self-directed in their learning (p. 14). Keeping this idea at all times will ease the process of heterogeneous groups even more when applying DI. Kronberger et al. (1997) also argued that most pupils express improvements in their learning process when given autonomy, which encourages their accountability for their own improvement. Therefore, it becomes more and more motivating for students to participate in the learning process. They will keep searching to acquire new knowledge and skills while making them better at learning. Tomlinson (2001) also explained that "differentiated classrooms operate on the premise that learning experiences are most effective when they are engaging, relevant, and interesting" (p. 5), which highlights the importance of diverse, updated and engaging topics in any teaching environment to improve the overall class engagement.

### **Suggested Rules of Thumb in Heterogeneous Classes in Costa Rica**

Now that we understand what DI is, what it entails, and we have delved into the requirements to implement it, we need to get rid of the misconceptions that can sometimes be drawn about using DI: "Differentiated instruction is not simply giving a 'normal' assignment to most students and 'different' assignments to students who are struggling or advanced" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 14). DI is the inclusion of the students' needs and understanding of the population's learning process to accommodate an activity to the level not only of the advanced learners but also to the slower learners. It is about helping them to scaffold their way to the next

step of learning. Tomlinson (2001) provided some Rules of Thumb that may guide us in a Costa Rica context as well, which can be also modified at the teacher's convenience:

1. Clarify key concepts and generalizations or principles that provide meaning and structure to your planned topic, chapter, unit, or lesson.
2. Think of your evaluation as a roadmap planning.
3. Give instruction to all students emphasizing critical and creative thinking.
4. Make lessons attractive to all students.
5. Remember that a differentiated classroom requires a balance between student-selected tasks, work arrangements and teacher-assigned tasks.
6. Make sure to have extra plans or activities for those who finish first.

Understanding the teaching process objectives in a heterogeneous class while using DI can help smoothen the different learning processes of the pupils and their differences in abilities. One of these objectives is reading comprehension when applying DI: "Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process in which the reader interacts with a given text in order to construct meaning" (Klang, et al., 2022, p. 52); consequently, the use of DI can help to guide the student in heterogeneous classes and even more in a Costa Rica context where the culture of reading is not as desirable as it could be. Heterogeneous classes could be approached not only with reading comprehension and their functionality but also when performing short investigation/research activities that may require their full understanding of a topic for the students to explore their ideas.

### **Activities with Differentiated Instruction in Heterogeneous Classes in Costa Rica**

DI requires a full understanding of the population in question, a large amount of creativity, and also “DI often requires teachers to act spontaneously in the classroom when students’ needs to become evident” (Meadows, 2021, p. 173). This sometimes leads us to a shortage of ideas or activities to perform in which DI could be successfully applied. Most teachers and even more “novice teachers should be skillful with their teaching from the beginning of their teaching careers. For that to happen, novice teachers need the right support before and during their early days as teachers” (Meadows, 2021, p. 183). Hence, the significance for some incursion on what can be used as guidelines to apply with heterogeneous groups is crucial, so further self-reflection can be done on whether these activities are being successful: “The most successful and influential approaches are not simply techniques to present the same old content differently but have their roots in one of the Grand Theories on human development, teaching, and learning” (Ashman et al., 2008, p. 1). Using collaborative learning will help to smoothen the flow of the process of achieving class goals: “Although initial research on cooperative learning focused on the social and educational benefits, research over the last two decades has examined the factors that mediate and moderate learning that occurs when students participate in small groups” (Ashman et al., 2008, p. 2).

While using collaborative learning in heterogeneous classes is of high importance, the understanding of how and what activities can work for one’s reality is paramount. Abduramanova (2021) provided some examples of activities that can be successfully used in heterogeneous classes. Along the various current teaching methods used, Socratic or generative questions are the ones mentioned to be the most effective. Socratic questions are based on the hypothesis that thoughts are logically structured and can be used to encourage critical thinking and deep conversations in even mixed-ability groups. This style helps students learn and think independently and can be unconventional. They can also develop critical thinking and carefully analyze the information or topic being developed in any activity assigned by the professor. Hence, these allow for receiving different questions from different students

depending on their abilities. Furthermore, concept maps are quite highlighted as well, which allows everyone to participate according to their abilities. Finally, open-ended questions is another activity to be developed in heterogeneous classes that can improve the development and successfulness of those with different levels in terms not only of participation but in understanding on the matter being developed. These questions do not encourage fixed answers, allowing a more critical and open approach to class discussion and the usage of language.

Positive impact can be perceived when using a generating sentence or question - Socratic questions- and how these can improve a heterogeneous class development by opening safe discussion spaces. When the idea is to increase the participation of the people involved when having different learning abilities, Socratic questions can be of immense help. These activities plus the understanding of the population and the accommodation of the instruction will increase the possibility of a positive learning path. Socratic questions should not only be used as a tool for discussion and improvement of language skills but also to classify/identify the students' levels, needs, and realities depending on their participation and depth of thoughts. As has been stated before, DI is not just modifying some small aspect of activities but to successfully accommodate the process to the needs of the target people including the developments of the class interaction and students' real and core opinion about different appealing topics to them.

## **Conclusion**

The lack of Differentiated Instruction information applied to a Costa Rican reality has led to the development of this paper. Indeed, modifying some activities for heterogeneous classes will help to apply these approaches -mentioned above- to a Costa Rican reality. Furthermore, and, as stated throughout this paper, it is not only about creating new activities for different students, but exploring new perspectives, approaches, and understanding the importance of

considering the details of our surroundings and our processes. Consequently, understanding the pupils and their needs can ameliorate the obstacles they may face during the learning process by successfully applying or developing the activities needed to continue advancing to their next level of knowledge. Additionally, by actively applying DI, collaborative learning, and reading comprehension approaches, the class can improve and progress gradually despite the different levels or abilities of each student. Besides, discovering a way to follow and embark on our journey to understand what works and what does not for each one of the groups we may be faced with is a needed path all teachers should take to find our process of self reflection and discovery.

There are still immense gaps in DI research, as the differentiation of levels in heterogeneous groups is quite broad for it to be correctly argued and generalized to one single process or activity. The need for active research is crucial so that results can be explicitly found thus observe in a Costa Rica reality to successfully identify the corresponding changes one may need for the activities suggested before; nevertheless, by opening up new possibilities and implementing the process, you can widen up the space for future research that can demonstrate not only groundbreaking information, but also detailed and specialized information, which is the goal behind the development of this paper. At this point, we need to start actively using the suggested activities while educating ourselves and those around us about the importance of action research in this matter to a full understanding and development of an approach that can meet Costa Rica education's needs. The importance of the surroundings in which we find ourselves and the various resources available for experimental or well-known trial-and-error processes is a triggering point that should be taken into account in further research as it can allow focussed and specialized research.

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## DECLARACIÓN JURADA

Yo, Christopher López Cerdas, cédula de identidad 116500654, estudiante de la Universidad Nacional, declaro bajo fe de juramento y consciente de las responsabilidades penales de este acto, que soy autor intelectual del Trabajo Final de Graduación Titulado "The Usage of a Differentiated Instruction Strategy to Teach Heterogeneous English Groups in a Costa Rican Context", para optar por el grado de Maestría en Educación con énfasis en Aprendizaje del Inglés.



Christopher López Cerdas 116500654

Heredia, a los 6 días del mes de septiembre del año 2022.



## Refrendo

Los abajo firmantes avalamos el Trabajo de Graduación del estudiante Cristopher López Cerdas, cédula 116500654, que lleva como título **The Usage of a Differentiated Instruction Strategy to Teach Heterogeneous English Groups in a Costa Rican Context**, dado que cumple con las disposiciones vigentes y la calidad académica requerida por el posgrado.

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Mag. Juan Pablo Zúñiga Vargas  
Tutor del énfasis Aprendizaje del Inglés  
Maestría en Educación

RITA MARIA  
ARGUEDAS  
VIQUEZ (FIRMA)

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M. Ed Rita Arguedas Víquez  
Coordinadora  
Maestría en Educación