As Fast as You Like

An explanatory case study of differentiated ESL teaching in a Swedish upper secondary school

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Abstract

If the individual characteristics and background of each learner affect their ability to optimally learn the teacher must be flexible and willing to adapt in order to optimally teach. The aim of this study was to observe and document operationalized differentiated English as a second language teaching in one upper secondary school in the southwest of Sweden. The method used was that of an explanatory case study using three teacher interviews and classroom observations. Interview transcripts and observations protocols were coded into themes and analysed. The school, teacher and classes were chosen based on purposeful sampling as previous observations in the school had indicated an atypical teaching method worth documenting as a possible best practise. The theoretical perspectives from which the results were analysed were those of differentiated instruction, individual differences in second language acquisition and content and language integrated learning. The study found that the teachers used differentiated teaching techniques mainly to accommodate learner readiness such as language proficiency but also, to a lesser extent, to accommodate learning styles, personalities and interests. These teaching methods were mainly made possible by the usage of open teacher-learner communication, continuous formative assessment and increased opportunities for language production demonstrating language proficiency. While the findings of this study are limited in their generalizability due to a limited material, the observed and reported amount of adaptation and differentiation over a pro-longed period of time was both unexpected and unique in its extent.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Individual Differences, Second Language Acquisition, English as a Second Language, Case Study

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1. Introduction – Documenting Solutions

The Swedish school system has experienced an increase in diversity of both learner proficiency and learner background (Statens Offentliga Utredningar [SOU], 2016; Skolverket, 2016) and as a result an important question has arisen: how can teachers create equity for all learners in a diverse school climate? The Swedish teacher training programme encourages teacher candidates to meet the needs of all learners and offers many theories but few practical examples of how this can be achieved. With this problem in mind I remembered a previous English teaching classroom observation. In the classroom observed the learners had seemingly been working on individual separate assignments and at different paces depending on their current proficiency levels. The teacher had reported it as an ongoing teaching method continuously used across the courses of English 5, 6 and 7. If functioning, this teaching method could serve as a piece of the puzzle to meeting the needs of the individual learner and increase the equity of the Swedish classroom. However, to do so it would need to be documented as a best practise as there only existed a very limited amount of research on operationalized differentiated teaching in the Swedish ESL context. Therefore, this project aims at exploring realized differentiated teaching, in relation to individual differences in second language acquisition, by performing an explanatory case study with three English teachers and their respective classrooms.

1.1. Hypothesis and Research Questions

The main issues examined in this study are differentiated teaching and individual differences in second language acquisition within the Swedish upper secondary ESL context, as well as teacher beliefs about the process. The hypothesis of this study is that there are some levels of conscious differentiated teaching operationalized by the teachers interviewed and in the classrooms observed. The study aimed to answer two research questions that served as the guiding lights in interviews and observations.

- How is differentiated teaching operationalized by three teachers, in three ESL classrooms of a Swedish upper secondary school?

- What are the beliefs guiding the teachers in their operationalization?

In answering these questions this paper follows the following structure: A presentation of the previous research and relevant theories and concepts; a presentation of the methods used for gathering and sorting data; an analysis of the data; a discussion about the findings and implications for practice and further research.

2. Previous Research and Theoretical Concepts

The theoretical perspectives applied to the material and analysis are mainly those of differentiated instruction (DI) and differentiated teaching. However, as there is limited research on the relationship between second language acquisition (SLA) and differentiation, the theoretical perspective is broadened by individual differences (ID) in SLA and content and language integrated learning (CLIL).

2.1. Theoretical Concepts: Meeting the Learners Needs and Abilities

The theoretical perspectives of differentiated teaching and individual differences in second language acquisition share the theoretical concept that individual factors affect any learning outcomes.

2.1.1. The essential ideas of differentiation and individual differences. The essential idea of differentiation is that every individual learner has the ability and potential to learn and develop but that there are individual differences in how and at what pace this is optimally achieved. Tomlinson (2014) writes: "teachers who differentiate provide specific alternatives for individuals to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's." (p. 15). The concepts of both differentiation and ID in SLA derive from the idea that there are distinctive differences in how individuals optimally learn, in what order knowledge can be acquired and how rapid this can be achieved. According to Saravanpavaa (2015), the individual factors of DI affecting our learning outcome are especially relevant in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom as the individual language learning needs and possibilities vary depending on both internal and external factors. Therefore, the differentiated classroom is always learner centred as it is the teacher that differentiates the teaching strategies to accommodate to the learners varying needs and abilities. Westberg and Archambault (2004) found that the teachers' attitudes and willingness of adaptation to the learners are some of the most important factors for successful

differentiated classrooms. The main specific factors of individuality to take into consideration for differentiated instruction can be summed up into three categories: the learners' readiness, interest and learning profile (Hertzog, 2004; Langley, 2015; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012; Subban & Round, 2015; Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson, 2015). However, as it is not always practically possible to differentiate teaching strategies to accommodate for every individual in the classroom another important concept within differentiation is learner grouping based on learner readiness, interest and learning profile (Burris, 2011; Langley, 2015; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson, 2014; Wand & Liao, 2011). There is a similar distinction of factors for ID in SLA where the five main factors are language aptitude, motivation, learning styles, learning strategies and personality (Dörnyei, 2006; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012). While some of the factors are disputed as to their importance for successful learning/SLA, learner readiness could arguably be considered the single most important factor.

2.1.2. Learner readiness and language aptitude. Learner readiness is the combination of the individual learner's previous knowledge, experience and proficiency, while language aptitude refers to factors including cognitive ability and working memory. These different factors result in a varied need for challenges, instruction and assessment. Every individual learner will inevitably have individual experiences, previous content knowledge that they bring with them into the classroom (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 29–32). The learner readiness refers both to the cognitive readiness in understanding theoretical concepts, confidence in taking on challenges as well as the previous content knowledge of the subject. These different parts of learner readiness are very similar to what Dörnyei (2006) and Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) refer to as language aptitude. Language aptitude refers to the cognitive ability to learn a new languages and in this also concerns the working memory. Further, according to Hattie and Yates (2014, p. 146–147) previous subject knowledge are one of the most important factors contributing to

how and what can be learned as new knowledge and ideas needs to be connected to the previously acquired. Because of this, the learner readiness affects what can be taught to the individual learner and the level of difficulty that is appropriate as the learning goal should be set low enough to be achievable but high enough to challenge the individual learner (Tomlinson, 2014; Hattie & Yates, 2014; Langley, 2015; Wang et al., 2008). However, Saravanpavaa (2015) argues that measuring proficiency levels in the ESL context is time consuming as language ability is not readily measured in regular written test but instead must be measured over time and by taking all forms of language communication into account. While the learner readiness and language aptitude are learner factors affecting appropriate learning process and content, the learners' interests and personalities affect the learners' motivation in approaching these processes and content.

2.1.3. Learner personalities and interests. The individual's personal interests and desires are important factors to take into account while planning differentiated instruction as this has the potential to engage learners in the tasks at hand and help keep both focus and motivation high. Differentiating the content to accommodate the individual learner's interest or areas of knowledge can potentially help increase motivation and engage learners while teaching new processes or trying new types of language products (Hertzog, 2016; Tomlinson, 2014). Increasing learner motivation and creating a desire for continued learning has been shown to conduce to successful SLA (Dörnyei, 2006, Lightbown & Spada, 2013). As the learners work with self-selected engaging topics the process or language product can be chosen by the teacher to adapt the challenge level to the learner language aptitude or general readiness. Using learner choice of topic is a potential way of drawing engagement and studying motivation from learners' interests but Tomlinson (2014, p. 64–68) also argues that there is opportunity in selecting topics or tasks not equal to but closely related to individual learner interests. Doing this, she argues, could broaden the interests of the learners while still having

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them produce on a topic engaging to them. However, as it is not always possible or desirable to have the learners choose their own content, teachers practising differentiation or using ID as factors affecting their teaching might need to profile their learners as to learning styles and learning strategies.

2.1.4. Learning and language profiles. Learning profiles, concerning how learners prefer to and optimally learn, can create opportunities for differentiation of the process, rather than the content, of learning. Wand and Liao (2011) in their extensive experimental study found that creating learning profiles and using these to differentiate the sequence of elements to learn had a significant positive effect on the learning outcome. They also found that the most important factors in learning profiling were learner learning motivation and style of learning. Another significant factor in learner learning profiles, from an ID in SLA perspective, is that of learning strategies (Dörnyei, 2006; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Learners using specific learning strategies have shown to be more successful at SLA. Hattie and Yates (2014, p. 209–214) further claim that this is not specific for language learning and that teaching learners learning strategies have a significantly positive effect on learning outcomes. Santangelo and Tomlinson (2012) in their study found that many teacher trainers created mental learning profiles based on perceived responses on different types of material but that very few actually tested the profiles on the individual learners. According to Saravanpavaa (2015) such mental learner profiles risk not covering the entire language learning profile in the context of a ESL classroom. Saravanpavaa (2015) further claims that extensive learning profiles are a key element for differentiated ESL teaching. However, several studies of actual classrooms (e.g. Langley, 2015) show that learning profiles are the learner factor least taken into account by teachers. While not as commonly used, learner learning profiling is, in the differentiated instructions theoretical framework, used to determine the individual motivation and preferred learning styles. This in turn is usable both to differentiate individual work, as learners can

occasionally work with identical content but with differentiated processes, and as a tool for well-functioning learner grouping (Waid, 2016; Wand & Liao, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014).

2.1.5. Grouping for individual differences. Learner grouping is not only a result of individual learner differences but also an important part of differentiated teaching as the groups can be created to be both content challenging and process supporting. Tomlinson (2014, p. 33–35) states that grouping learners and having them working together towards shared goals is one way of utilizing differentiation as the groups can work with varied content or process depending on the needs and strengths of each group. Creating heterogeneous groups can in this sense be a way of using the individual learners' strengths in some areas of either content or process and compensate for their lack of strength in others. In Burris (2011) study of an elementary school, the school used standardized knowledge tests to create homogenous learner groups lasting over a prolonged period of time. The results of these language proficiency tests were also used for smaller learner grouping within each larger group. The teachers participating in this study expressed a positive effect to their ability to differentiate instruction in these grouped classrooms compared to their previous experiences in mixed-ability, none grouped, classrooms. However, there has been some critique expressed towards this type of proficiency grouping (e.g. Langley, 2015; Tomlinson, 2014) as it does not allow for learners complimenting each other and it has been argued that this perpetuates learners in permanent groups of low- and high achievers. Tomlinson (2014, p. 33–35) further argue that a variation of grouping to account for either readiness, interests, learning profiles or learner choice is to prefer in order avoid giving learners set proficiency roles and keeping learner motivation and confidence high. While grouping learners works as a tool for differentiating there is also a need to adapt the learning goals to accommodate both the group of learners and the relevant syllabi.

2.1.6. Integrating content, language and the individual learner. Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) or content based instruction are theoretical concepts for integrating content and second language learning in order for learners to acquire both knowledges simultaneously (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010; Stoller, 2004). Integrating content and language learning could be used as a way of keeping the language learning relevant and meaningful to the individual learner. CLIL also offers opportunities for increased language production and in turn increased opportunities for demonstrations of learner readiness and formative feedback on language proficiency. Stoller (2004) claims that learners using a target language within the process of learning content (other than language content) and actively use related concepts will improve their language proficiency. Coyle et al. (2010, p. 37–38) divide the language communication used during CLIL into three parts: The language of learning, the language for learning and the language through learning. Coyle et al. (2010, p. 115–128) further claim that assessment in a CLIL context is complex as there is a risk that either the content or the language production suffers as a result of lacking proficiency in the interdisciplinary subject (content or language). The Swedish upper secondary syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7 has CLIL partly integrated as the course syllabi does not only cover language but also certain content areas (Skolverket, 2011, p. 53–57).

2.2. Previous Research: An Absence of the ESL Perspective

Differentiated instruction and differentiated teaching are well researched areas but there is only a limited amount of research connecting DI to Second language acquisition and even less connecting it to the acquisition of ESL. The leading researcher in the field of differentiated instruction and differentiated teaching is Carol Ann Tomlinson (e.g. Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012; Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson, 2015) whom has published numerous works on the subject and created much of the theoretical framework used today. Tomlinson's teaching career started in an American elementary school and a major part of both her and other

research in the field of DI has been conducted in an elementary school setting (e.g. Burris, 2011; Hertzog, 2004; Westberg & Archambault, 2004). However, in recent years there has been a growing number of studies conducted in the higher level school settings such as upper secondary and high school (e.g. Langley, 2015; Waid, 2016; Wang, Many & Krumenaker, 2008). One of the larger studies has been conducted by Westberg and Archambault's (2004). The study is a collaboration of 8 researchers, conducting 10 individual case studies under the umbrella aim to document and describe successful practises used across ten elementary schools using differentiated teaching techniques. There is very limited DI-research conducted with relation to ESL or even SLA. While Langley (2015) performed a large case study of seven English teachers and their respective classes, the studied teachers taught English as a first language and did not have the perspectives of SLA or ESL. One previous researcher has connected the research traditions of ESL and DI (Saravanpavaa, 2015) and both described the interrelation and provided implications for practise. However, Saravanpavaa's article is not based on first hand empirical research. To my knowledge there has been only one previous study of DI in the Swedish ESL context, a student essay looking at mixed-ability ESL classrooms and teaching strategies (Svärd, 2007).

3. Method: A much needed case-study

In order to answer the research questions this study has the approach of an explanatory case study using teacher interviews and classroom observations. Theoretically, adapting the teaching to meet the individual learner's readiness, interests and learning profiles could increase the equity of the Swedish classrooms of English. However, only very limited amount of practical research has been conducted as to realized differentiated instruction and ID in SLA within the Swedish ESL context. While this and Svärd's (2007) study have similar theoretical scopes, Svärd's material did not include classroom observations and did not aim at documenting specific teaching methods. Consequently, it can be said that there is an absence of documented best practices, through case studies, concerning differentiated teaching and ID in SLA in the Swedish ESL context. Therefore, this study has the approach of an explanatory case study using three classroom observations and three teacher interviews. Duff (2008, p. 30–33) describes performing a case study as studying a concrete phenomenon (case), that is a bounded system, studied in-depth using multiple sources of information, within its context and further claim that all case studies always contain an element of interpretation. Yin (as cited in Duff, 2008, p. 41) further suggests that there are three types of case studies: the exploratory, the descriptive and the explanatory case study but that most studies contain elements of more than one type. This specific case study contains elements of both the explanatory and descriptive case study. The main strengths of this research method are the potential completeness and thickness of the data documenting a context bound real life phenomena, possibly capturing the atypical or unique (Duff, 2008; Nunan, 2012). There are however, several disadvantages of using the case study approach as a research method. Duff (2008, p. 57) names seven such disadvantages including: generalizability, objectivity, small-samples and ethics. Generalizability is the most pronounced of these as the limitations in quantifiable data and the context dependent material limits the transferability of the findings.

However, Nunan (2012, p. 79–81) claims that the critique concerning generalizability may not be applicable as the aim of the case study is case specific and therefore only can achieve internal validity. Instead the claims made can only be made for the specific context and the findings tested only for internal validity and transparency of the data and analysis.

3.1. Material: Choosing the Teachers and Students to Study

As case studies in nature are context dependent the background and choice of materials must be clearly defined to build internal validity for the study and give any findings legitimacy (Duff, 2008, p. 43–46). As part of the context it is also imperative to pick out and be explicit about the sample population and identify any particular research concepts that might be of interest in examination. In this specific case study, the theories of DI and ID in SLA are the research concepts serving as theoretical lens to the findings. This limits the possible findings as other theoretical concepts primarily were not taken into consideration. The specific school studied was purposefully selected due to previous observations of what was perceived as an atypical or unique longitude teaching method. As these observations had been conducted two years' prior to this study a teacher and the principle of the school were contacted and during this contact the continuation of the teaching method was confirmed. Through emails and personal meetings, it was clarified that three English teachers used the previously observed teaching method, mainly in the natural sciences programme but also in a language introduction class for recent immigrants going through an individualized upper secondary programme. Two of these teachers were connected, as teaching faculty or lecturers, to the local teacher training programme. Interviews were arranged with the three teachers (2016-11-10, 2016-11-18 and 2016-11-22) and classroom observations scheduled for one class for each respective teacher. The classes chosen were at the time taking the courses English 6, English 7 and the English language introduction class. The three teachers and classes were the foundation of the original data and material gathered during this study.

3.2. Teacher Interviews: What Questions to Ask and How to Ask Them

The interviews conducted were structured in order to answer the research questions and based on the theoretical interviewing concepts of Seidman (2005) and Nunan (2012). Seidman (2005, p. 16–20) suggests holding three separate interviews of 90 minutes each. The first interview should go into detail about the interviewees personal background leading up to the present situation. The second interview should address the present situation in a concrete and detailed manner. The third interview should address the interviewee's feelings about the subject for the interviews and any relevant thoughts about the future. While conducting three 90 minute interviews with each teacher was not practically possible within the limitation of this study, the three themes suggested by Seidman (2005, p. 16–19) was used as individual sections of a single interview with each teacher. As the aim and the research questions of this study were not focused on the personal past or thoughts about the future the second section, the detailed and concrete description of the current situation, were emphasised with more questions than the other two sections. The questions were, in accordance to the suggestions of Seidman (2005, p. 78–86), formulated to have the participants tell their own stories and answering open questions (How- questions) and careful care was taken not to lead the participants to answer in specific ways, thus avoiding technical terms such as differentiated instruction in the questions asked. The formality of the interviews could be placed somewhere between semi-structured and fully structured (Nunan, 2012, p. 149). There was a set of pre-determined questions and categories but the order in which the questions were asked and which follow-up questions were used depended on the interview participant and answers. Therefore, as suggested in Seidman (2005, p. 19–20), participant digression of subject became somewhat problematic and resulted in gathered material not relevant to this specific study. As all interview participants, as well as the interviewer, had Swedish as their first language the interviews were conducted in Swedish. The excerpts used in the analysis, findings and

discussion sections were translated into English by the researcher. While this created potential issues of biasness in translation, the value of interview participants being able to answer in their L1 was considered vital for the study. The interviews were audio-recorded using two separate devices to minimize risk of technical failures or non-audible parts of the interviews. To complement the audio-recordings notes were taken during the interview. The audio-recordings were transcribed and the notes added as comments to the transcript. One set of each recording and the original transcripts will be preserved on an encrypted hard drive. The interview questions are available in Appendix B. The questions not bolded were used as follow-up questions mainly if the interview participant needed encouragement or did not understand the question at hand.

3.3. Classroom Observations: Observing the Unique

Using a previously existing check-list for observing differentiated instruction and an observation scheme for observing English teaching a new observation scheme was created and used throughout three English lessons. Subban and Round (2015) developed the check-list specifically designed for classroom observations of differentiated teaching, using a total of 20 teacher candidates observing classrooms where differentiated teaching was taking place. This observation scheme consisted of 26 yes/no questions and was intended to generate data for discussions between observers and observed teachers about the differentiated instruction taking place. As the observations for this study were meant to generate data comparable with the interviews the existing check-list had to be adapted for this new purpose. The yes/no questions were adapted to generate notes and the version was piloted as an observation scheme in two classrooms. The data generated through these pilot observations turned out to not relate to the specifics of language teaching. Therefore, the pilot observation scheme was revised using the addition of a simplified COLT-scheme as presented in Nunan (2012, p. 99). Some questions were taken directly from the simplified COLT-scheme while some questions

were merged and rewritten resulting in an 18 question observation scheme of differentiation and English teaching. The observation scheme is available in Appendix A.

3.4. Coding Data: Revealing the Concealed Patterns

The interview transcripts and the observation notes were coded separately using process coding, as explained by Saldaña (2016, p. 110–115), to reveal the processes reported and observed. To determine the coding method most likely to reveal the underlining structures of the material several coding approach were tested on small pieces of material in accordance with the suggestions of Saldaña (2016, p. 69–71). The coding method found to generate the most useful material was a process oriented coding method (Saldaña, 2016 p. 110–115). In order to extrapolate the maximum amount of analysable data from the interview transcripts and observation protocols a splitting coding technique was used, coding each line. While this resulted in an extensive amount of coded data and a large number of categories the findings could this way be argued to maintain higher internal validity. The approach was mainly deductive as differentiated instruction and ID in SLA served as the theoretical lens. However, during the coding process one unexpected theme stood out, the usage of interdisciplinary language and content projects (CLIL). According to Nunan (2012) it is not uncommon for the data and analysis to inductively lead to new aspects of research even in a deductive approach. As a result, CLIL was added to the theoretical background. The interview transcripts and observation notes were coded separately and could consequently be compared afterwards to confirm or disconfirm any findings. However, due to the limited amount of classroom observations (3) the possibilities of both confirmation and disconfirmation were limited. While a complete triangulation would have been desired this was not possible due to the limitations of this study (Duff, 2008; Nunan, 2012).

<center>**4. Analysis: How They Made It Work**</center>

During the coding process a number of codes and themes emerged through the gathered data. The most prominent and confirmable of these were the following four themes and eight subthemes. The names figuring in quotes and paraphrases are pseudonyms.

4.1. It All Depends on What They Need

The focus on learner needs and abilities with active communication between teachers and learners were a theme concurrent in all teacher interviews and classrooms observed.

   4.1.1. Safe classroom environments and open communication. The learners and their needs were the centre of all classrooms observed and a theme that all three teachers came back to in their interviews. During the classroom observations all three teachers acted as facilitators, asking questions and supporting the learners. The opinions and goals of the learners were the centre of the classes. Cecilia in her interview said:

   Cecilia: you really need to have a climate where you can say that

   Interviewer: Mhm

   Cecilia: that, I don't understand. Okay that's fine. Cecilia is not going to grade me because I don't understand. However, I need to learn this.

Here, she emphasised the importance of creating an open learning environment were feedback could be viewed as something positive and admitting lack of knowledge/understanding not something negative. Benjamin also spoke of the classroom environment and stressed that such a classroom environment could only come from an open and direct communication about expectations and ongoing processes. Benjamin: "in the end it is all about seeing them and making them feel seen, very much so. And to, all the time talk about why you are doing, why you are doing what you are doing." These ideas could be traced in the observations as all

lessons started with explicit goals for both the lesson and how these goals related back to the course syllabus. According to Tomlinson (2014, p. 29–31) the very centre of a differentiated classroom is the learner centeredness and Westberg and Archambault (2004) found that teacher willingness to adapt and change to the learners' personalities were one factor commonly observed with successfully differentiating teachers. However, while the learners and their needs were the centre of the classrooms, these needs were also directly related to the curriculum and the course syllabi.

4.1.2. Believing in the learners and creating ambitious language goals. In all interviews and two of the three classes observed, the starting point of the teaching were language production and/or general language goals with several levels connected to the relevant course syllabus. All three of the teachers interviewed claimed that they actively created, explained and concretized language goals for the learners. Using specific goals with several different levels could be a way of differentiating to both learner readiness and ambition level (Hertzog, 2004). If there are several acceptable end goals for the production varying in their degree of difficulty the learners can themselves choose their ambition level. The teachers claimed to relate these levels to the course syllabi and grade levels of the English courses (Skolverket, 2011, p. 53–57). However, the teachers also claimed that they consciously created very high goals for the learners in order to challenge them, relating the goals to grades above E. Challenging learners has shown to have a positive effect on both learning in general and SLA (Hattie & Yates, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). On creating ambitious goals from the course requirements, Benjamin said:

> I start with them, of course, and then I start from, from the learners that is and believe that they can
> do it. I think that is very important to believe in that they, to make them believe in that they can do
> it.

Creating this type of clear goals and end goals creates opportunity for teacher-learner communication on where the learner's language production is in relation to the goal and thereby improving any formative feedback provided (Tomlinson, 2014; Hattie & Yates, 2014; Coyle et al., 2010). While the learning goals with basis in the course syllabi created a framework for the process and end products, the content was chosen using other factors.

4.2. Meaningful and Relatable Content and Communication

The teaching content and language productions, including interdisciplinary projects, observed and reported in teacher interviews were continuously related to both the course syllabi and the interests of the learners. content

4.2.1. Using learner interests, real life content and learner choices. The teaching content were partly determined in relation to the relevant course syllabus but also, to a varying degree, to accommodate the different learner interest and included a varying amount of learner choice. While all teachers believed in establishing a framework for the teaching content, Anna was the most restrictive concerning the amount of allowed learner content choice. Anna: "I think it can be very difficult because, like, because too much openness creates confusion or, you don't really know what the task requires." However, Benjamin claimed to place a lot of emphasis on learner choice, both regarding individual and group choices. Benjamin: "I want everyone to get as far as possible and then I try to somehow identify what they can be, their interests are really important as a starting point." Whether or not the learners themselves chose the content of their English classes, all teachers claimed that their teaching content always were selected with regard to relevance for the specific learner group. They further reported to include a level of choice within a given framework. Reportedly and partly observed, the framework for content choice was always related to the relevant course syllabus (Skolverket, 2011, p. 53–57). However, the content addressed during classes were also affected by interdisciplinary collaborations between teachers and courses.

4.2.2. Using CLIL for meaningful communication. While not observable in any of the classroom observations, all three teachers spoke extensively about interdisciplinary projects integrating teaching content of other course syllabi and language teaching. Benjamin:

> We work in interdisciplinary as well, in a number of projects each school year, so, and Swedish or English are always a part of that. Or, or both and then, and then I will do like this sometimes, sometimes a task can be harder to complete in English, but some, some want that challenge

The interdisciplinary projects described were connected to varying themes and ended in written and/or spoken production, combining content knowledge and language proficiency. The productions were reportedly assessed as language production to match parts of the English course syllabi (Skolverket, 2011, p. 53–57). In accordance with Coyle et al. (2010, p. 48–53) these interdisciplinary projects required extensive collaboration between content and language teachers where the language teachers were required to work with both the language of and the language for learning while the content teachers focused on their course content. This type of teacher cooperation has also been shown to be an important success factor for differentiated teaching (Westberg & Archambault, 2004). The difficulty of simultaneous content and language assessment, where lack of language proficiency affected demonstration of content knowledge (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 115–119), were acknowledged by teachers and not all learners used the interdisciplinary projects as a way of developing and demonstrating their ESL proficiency. The learners choosing not to use these interdisciplinary projects as a way of demonstrating ESL language proficiency were given other opportunities to do so.

> Anna: in English it's very easy because you work with four different elements basically all the time.

> I: Mhm

> Anna: It's about writing, reading, listening and speaking

To a large extent, all language productions were used both for formative assessment and as gradable demonstrations of language ability.

4.3. Assessment: More Than Just a Grade

There was extensive usage of formative assessments both from the teacher, peers and in the form of self-evaluation where the process of assessment and feedbacking was used as a learning strategy.

4.3.1. Formatively assessing and re-assessing language production. Continuous formative assessment, re-assessment and peer-evaluation was an important part of the teaching reported and observed. According to all three teachers, the language production and completed assignments were used for formative feedback and as foundation for grading over several years. This was also partly observed in the classroom observations. Cecilia brought forward an example of using recordings of the learners' oral productions in such a way:

> and the next time they do something I will put it in the reflections they receive that they are supposed to look back on it. Now I want you to look at your old film and then you compare it with this film. What are you doing better, what have you improved, what can you still develop and how did this round go?

This assessment and re-assessment was used to determine the individual learner language ability and directly relates to learner readiness and the usage of formative assessment to monitor learner progression (Waid, 2016; Langley, 2015). The learners' also performed peer-assessments and gave each other feedback on the language productions. In two of the classes observed there where active peer-evaluation and peer-feedbacking as the learners commented on other learners work in relation to the goals and assessment criteria set by the respective teacher. This was both a method used for the learners to develop their own production and to improve their understanding of the learning goals and grading criteria. Cecilia said:

Instead of just gabbling of the assessment rubric they got to test it on this text, that they hadn't written themselves, to assess it. And they then got to turn over that feedback and then they got do a final draft and then they turned it in and then I read it.

The usage of peer-evaluation could be viewed as a teaching strategy to increase learner meta-awareness of how to reach the language goals and grading criteria.

4.3.2. Teaching learning strategies and meta-awareness. The learners were actively encouraged to use the formative assessment and peer-evaluation to improve their language production and reach their set goals. Benjamin talked about the usage of feedback and evaluations:

So it is really about, to like train them to see: Okay but, what do I need? What do I need? Which are my strengths? What do I need to develop? How then can I develop this? And to have a, for them to have a consciousness then. You could say that you partially transfer, gradually transfer the responsibility from the teacher to the student concerning, the thing about becoming the owner of your own learning.

This quote highlights the role of facilitator taken by the teachers in the classrooms, providing the learners with feedback and tools to improve their own proficiency. Teaching and actively working with learning strategies in this manner has been shown to increase the chances of successful SLA (Dörnyei, 2006; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Cecilia further commented on the active teaching of language development strategies:

Which also puts a pretty large amount of the responsibility on the individual to really take that responsibility. If I now know how I am going to do, to influence this positively, ahm, or, or develop, how do I really do this? To, to really take that responsibility as well.

As the learners are provided with the tools of learning and peer/self-evaluation increases the learner responsibility of developing their own proficiency and reaching their set out goals.

4.4. Meeting the Needs and Abilities of the Learners

The usage of meaningful content and processes, an open classroom climate and different forms of formative assessment allowed for a number of differentiation strategies.

   4.4.1. The Usain Bolt groups of English. Working with the classroom climate, an open communication and belief in the ability of the learners lead to differentiation strategies with the main goal of challenging the learners at their individual proficiency level with regards to difficulty and time. On the topic of how to start a semester with a class, Anna said: "English 5 as a level is pretty much like elementary school, grade nine level, and it becomes a little to childish and when it is too childish for our learners it doesn't motivate them." Both Cecilia and Benjamin reported similar standpoints. All teachers agreed that the learners, during their first semester in upper secondary, worked exclusively with the English 5 course during their English classes. However, during the second semester, while still officially in the course of English 5, the learners would to a varying degree progress to work with the goals of the English 6 course since they would no longer be challenged by the English 5 syllabus. According to Saravanpavaa (2015) this would be typical for differentiated ESL teaching, as it takes time to assess the learners' second language proficiency before fully using differentiated teaching. While challenging the learners on their individual readiness and cognitive abilities have been shown to have a positive effect on SLA and is key in differentiated teaching (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson, 2015) all learners need to reach the basic English 5 ability level. While this would commence as a general challenge for the entire group of learners, the second semester would also be the starting point for individuals or groups of learners being able to seek higher levels of challenge.

   Speaking about how he deals with varying proficiency levels in the classroom and the higher ability learners especially, Benjamin said:

they maybe do it on a slightly deeper level or they move, they move on. But sometimes it is like this, that then I have special assignments, to the ones that have gotten a little further then, ahm, that happens. For a while I called them the Usain Bolt groups, we have them. The rest of the class run faster but these run incredibly fast.

Two different differentiation techniques are highlighted in this quote, either the high ability learners finish assignments quicker and move on to the next or they use the formative feedback to improve the quality of their language products, thus aiming to deepen their knowledge and achieve higher grades. While teachers allowing learners to work with different assessment criteria and deepen their work have been observed by other researcher (e.g. Burris, 2011; Hertzog, 2004; Langley 2015) there has been, to my knowledge, no previous observations of learners working ahead with new assignments on this magnitude or during such a prolonged period of time. According to the teachers interviewed and partly observed in one of the classes the most advanced learners were more than an entire semester ahead of their English course schedules.

This level of differentiation required a maintained open communication between the teachers and the learners about difficulty levels and assignments. While speaking about the importance of continuous communication, Cecilia said:

you who are moving on in English seven, and there, some I recommend doing that, and because you have this communication with the students they can feel that pretty much for themselves, or it can be like this that there is insanely much to do during one period, like I can't deal with it. Fine, you can do English 7 in the third year, it is there for you.

This quote ties into the usage of differentiated challenge levels, where the teacher challenges the advanced learners while avoiding any additional pressure for learners in need of more time and support. As the classrooms reportedly would become successively more differentiated throughout the courses of English 5, 6 and 7, the full amount of differentiation

could only be observed in one of the classes (the English 7 class). In this classroom three different assignments and different stages within these assignments were simultaneously ongoing while the teacher Benjamin functioned as a facilitator, repeating already available assessment criteria and giving feedback to the individual learner on their ongoing process. A concern often presented by teachers working with differentiation is the lack of time for classroom management and finding/creating teaching material material (Burris, 2004; Waid, 2016; Wang at. al, 2008). While the teachers of this study claimed a lot of time spent on planning and material creation time did not appear as a major problem. The teaching of language learning strategies, including self-evaluation, and high learner motivation due to sufficient challenge level (Dörnyei, 2006; Lightbown & Spada, 2013) were seemingly the factors making the differentiation level functional for the teachers.

The teachers reported allowing high ability learners to further develop their language productions, thus matching additional course knowledge requirements, either as a compliment or instead of working in advance with a new assignment. Anna said: "I don't work like that; I don't work with in advance. Rather, I instead work with an openness to different levels." This adaptation to learner readiness and language learning aptitude in working with different assessment criteria would increase the challenge level and thus also result in increased motivation for the learners (Tomlinson, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The observation of Anna's English 6 class partly confirms her statement as all learners were working with the same assignments. However, according to Anna, during the latter semesters the learners would still be working in a similar way of that observed in Benjamin's class. Anna said:

> what happens is that in year three a lot of students absolutely haven't reached the levels they want in English 7. Then I get a more stripped down group and can focus my work more on them and the high proficiency levels.

The high ability learners reportedly reached their goals and demonstrated their language abilities earlier as they were working more in-depth with the assignments and using other assessment criteria. Therefore, some of them would finish their English 7 course ahead of schedule, reaching the grades matching their individual goals, rendering smaller groups for the teacher to work with. While Cecilia claimed to work in a similar way to Benjamin in her interview, the differentiation observed in her class where more similar to what Anna described.

> Cecilia: if I have different learners in the same group and some learners need a lot of time during the lessons. Then there are the fast learners, there are those that go home and finish writing a whole thing in an afternoon and then, because they think it is fun or because that is how they work. What are they to do?
>
> I: Mhm
>
> Cecilia: on the next? And then I usually think that the assignments should be in several steps.

In the class observed with Cecilia, the entire class was working on the same assignment but some learners finished ahead of time and instantly got individual instructions on how to continue with the next step. Cecilia in her interview explained that this specific assignment was designed with several steps, resulting in both written and oral production. The usage of different assessment criteria, having learners continue on with a new assignment, or the next step in the current, both result in learners working with different things or at different levels. Using these several steps, often with several opportunities for individual formative assessment is a commonly used differentiation strategy (Hertzog, 2006; Tomlinson, 2014).

4.4.2. Grouping the learners according to ability or personality. The teachers reported a varied extent of active grouping but using varying criteria. Anna claimed to almost entirely

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group at random while Benjamin and Cecilia stated that they, in some cases, grouped according to ability level. Going furthest in her reasoning of grouping Cecilia said:

> you can think in a few different ways. Either I put the proficient in one group, ahm, because, maybe they then, yeah, teach each other on the level they are, on the level they are currently.

Benjamin also claimed to use similar types of proficiency grouping. Proficiency grouping has been shown to have positive effects on learning as learners on similar proficiency level need the same amount of challenge and adapt collectively to the assignment (Burris, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014, p. 48–50). Cecilia additionally claimed to occasionally group learners of varying proficiency levels together as the high proficiency learners would support the lower proficiency learners while benefitting themselves from giving the support. Langley (2015) observed similar grouping were English teachers claimed similar benefits as a result. On grouping for oral production Cecilia in addition said: "I try to think like this, okay, we got to get a, have a conversation that keeps on going. That is what I consider, no very quiet group. There has to be someone that can push a little." This could be viewed as grouping according to personality or learning style, rather than proficiency, which according to Dörnyei (2006) have a disputed effect on successful SLA but according to Saravanpavaa (2015) is crucial to successful differentiated ESL teaching.

5. Discussion, Limitations and Implications

In summary this study found that the three teachers observed and interviewed were using several strategies to differentiate their teaching, using individual differences as factors for determining both classroom content and teaching processes, confirming the hypothesis. There has been some debate on whether English in Sweden, from a teaching perspective, should be considered a second or foreign language (e.g. Hult, 2012). While it is not without problem, the English teaching in this essay is referred to as the teaching of English as a second language rather than English as a foreign language. This choice is motivated by the unique position of the subject of English in the Swedish curriculum (Hult, 2012; Skolverket, 2011) and the great influence, both present and historical, of English in Sweden (Modiano, 2003). Further, there are some limitations to the implications of this study. As with all case studies the findings of this one are limited in their transferability and generalisability (Duff, 2006; Nunan, 2016). Due to the restrictions of the scope of this case study the findings could not be triangulated and consequently some of the findings could not be confirmed through multiple sources of data. Additionally, the classroom observation scheme was based on the check-list created by Subban and Round (2015) which had not previously been tested with the purpose of this study and further piloting and a greater number of classroom observations would have been beneficial for the validity of the findings.

The study did find that while there was a very limited usage of individual learner profiling, regarding learning strategies and learning styles, the factor taken most into consideration was learner readiness with regards to previous knowledge and cognitive language aptitude. The teachers also used learner grouping and while most grouping reportedly was done at random or according to learner choice the teachers also used grouped according to ability or personality. Overall there were several similarities but also several differences in the teacher usage of differentiation strategies. These results are similar to previous case studies

concerning differentiated instruction (eg. Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012; Dörnyei, 2006; Langley, 2015; Waid, 2016). The more surprising finding was the extent of reported differentiation over a pro-longed period of time where some high ability learners worked so far ahead that they finished English 7 over a semester ahead of schedule with language proficiency satisfactory to both the teachers and learners. This could be viewed both as a result of the extensive usage of peer/self-evaluation and other language learning strategies shown to have a strongly positive effect on learning in general and SLA especially (Dörneyi, 2006; Hattie & Yates, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Factors contributing to the amount of differentiation over time appear to be the teaching of language strategies and the interdisciplinary content and language integrating projects. The additional language production and demonstration of language proficiency offered by the projects could limit the amount of extra work for the differentiating teachers and since only higher proficiency learners were given this opportunity this would partly negate the difficulties of CLIL assessment brought forward by Coyle et al. (2010, p. 115–119). Similar to Westberg and Archambault's (2004) extensive study of successfully differentiating teachers, the teachers observed in this study used extensive collaboration (with each other, the learners and content teachers within the CLIL-projects). They also reported a strong belief in positive effects of differentiation and were willing to adapt to the individual differences of each learner group as well as the individual learners.

While the generalizability of this study is limited there are suggestions for practical implications and further research. The findings indicate that there are possibilities to differentiate second language teaching, allowing high proficiency learners to be additionally challenged while supporting lower proficiency learners. Open teacher-learner communication, learner self/peer-evaluation, careful choice of content and teacher collaboration create opportunities for differentiation and adaptation to individual differences in second language

acquisition. This study also indicates that there are several similarities between individual differences in second language acquisition and differentiated teaching. The connection between these two theoretical perspectives could be fruitful to continuously explore. Further, this study could have been made more reliable had there been more precise research tools, such as observation schemes targeting differentiated language teaching, suggesting a need for further research. Finally, this study indicates that differentiated teaching is possible to operationalize in the Swedish upper secondary ESL context and that there are reasons to continue exploring this area of teaching. There is also a need to measure the successfulness of learner SLA using the methods of differentiated teaching. It is my hope that this case study, with its limited implications, can serve as inspiration both for further researchers but also for teachers of English seeking to meet their learners needs and challenge them fully.

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Appendix A: The observation scheme

**A) The structure, organization and development of a
lesson**

1. Has the lesson been structured in a particular way to accommodate student differences?

2. Are there explicit displays of classroom roles, expectations and routines?

3. Are there schedules on display that indicate a systematic plan for the lesson's activities?

B) Classroom management and content

4. Is the teacher's role one of a facilitator and participant in this setting?

5. To what extent is the target language used?

6. What is the activity type (e.g. drill, role play, etc.)

7. Are the learners working in groups, individually, in whole class or in a combination of these?

8. Is the range of topic broad or narrow? Is the topic selectable for learners?

9. Is the language discourse extended or restricted? Is the discourse selectable for the learners?

10. Are learners involved in listening, speaking, reading, writing, or combinations of these?

C) Differentiated strategies/techniques during teaching

11. Have varied activities and techniques been utilized during the teaching segment of the lesson?

12. Are groups formed flexibly or along ability levels?

13. Is key information presented in different ways repetitively during the course of the lesson to accommodate for varying language levels and proficiency?

D) Activities, materials and teaching aids

14. Have the activities considered the varying interests/engagement, learning profiles and ability levels in the classroom?

15. To what extent is the requested information predictable in advance?

16. What types of materials are used and what seems to be the purpose of these?

17. Are the activities an extension of the lesson, and do they reinforce skills taught?

E) Differentiated assessments and application

18. Are there different assessment tasks offered to students to demonstrate their understanding of the knowledge or concept?

19. Are students permitted to demonstrate understanding using different mediums?

20. Are the assessment tasks sensitive to student diversity, including additional learning needs?

21. What areas of English proficiency are the assessment tasks measuring?

Appendix B: The interview questions

Del 1. Intervjupersonens bakgrund

Berätta historien om hur din väg från att du bestämde dig för att bli lärare fram tills dit du befinner dig nu?

- Utbildning?
- Yrkeserfarenhet?
- Vidareutbildning i yrkeslivet?
- Personliga erfarenheter?

Del 2. Konkret - Hur det ser ut idag

Vid planeringen av upplägget för en termin, vilka elevfaktorer påverkar planeringen? Hur påverkar dessa och varför?

Hur planerar du bedömningar under engelskkursers gång? Hur använder du dessa bedömningar?

- Öppna/slutna
- Formativa/summativa
- Kollektivt tidsbestämt/individuell tidsram

Hur planerar du ditt undervisningsinnehåll? Vilka faktorer påverkar dina val och på vilket sätt påverkar de?

- Elevintressen
- Elevernas förkunskaper

Hur planerar du undervisningsprocessen? Med det menar jag, övningar, uppgifter, föreläsningar, etc.

Vilka faktorer påverkar denna processplanering och hur påverkar de?

- Elevintressen?
- Elev/lärandeprofilering?
- Gruppindelning av elever?

Hur arbetar du med gruppindelning, individuellt arbete och helklassarbete? Vad styr hur du lägger upp arbetet?

- Förkunskaper
- Intressen
- Lärandeprofilering

Skulle du säga att du brukar variera din undervisning till individuella elever eller grupper av elever?

(Hur skulle du beskriva denna variering och vad motiverar dig till att genomföra den?)

Vad skulle du vilja lägga till i beskrivningen av din engelskundervisning?

Del 3. Tankar, känslor och framtiden

Hur ser utmaningarna ut idag ?

Hur känner du inför framtiden med engelskundervisningen?

Hur tror du att framtidens utmaningar ser ut?