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MÜXTƏLİF SƏVİYYƏLİ SİNİFLƏRDƏ FƏRQLƏNDİRİLMİŞ TAPŞIRIQLARIN TƏTBİQİ: AZƏRBAYCAN LİNQVODİDAKTİK PERSPEKTİVİNDƏN TƏHLİLİ BAXIŞ

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IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED ASSIGNMENTS IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSROOMS: ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW FROM AN AZERBAIJANI LINGUODIDACTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ВНЕДРЕНИЕ ДИФФЕРЕНЦИРОВАННЫХ ЗАДАНИЙ В РАЗНОУРОВНЕВЫХ КЛАССАХ: АНАЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ ОБЗОР С ПОЗИЦИИ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНСКОЙ ЛИНГВОДИДАКТИКИ

Xülasə. Məqalə müxtəlif səviyyəli siniflərdə fərqləndirilmiş tapşırıqların tətbiqini, xüsusilə xarici dil tədrisi kontekstində araşdırır. Tədqiqat müasir diferensial təlim nəzəriyyələrinə və yerli təhsil təcrübəsinə əsaslanaraq, tapşırıqların müxtəlif hazırıq səviyyələri arasında balans yaratmaqda oynadığı rolu təhlil edir. Həmçinin metodoloji təşkil, sinif nümunələri və müəllim hazırlığı üçün tövsiyələr təqdim olunur.

Açar sözlər: *fərqləndirilmiş təlim, fərqləndirilmiş tapşırıq, qarışıq səviyyəli sinif, Azərbaycan təhsili, UDL (Universal Dərs Dizaynı), linqvodidaktika, ingilis dili tədrisi.*

Abstract. The article examines the use of differentiated assignments in mixed-ability classrooms, with a focus on foreign language teaching. Drawing on current differentiation theories and classroom practice, it analyzes how such tasks support learners with varying readiness levels. The paper also provides methodological guidelines, practical examples, and recommendations for teacher development.

Keywords: *differentiated instruction, differentiated assignment, mixed-ability classroom, Azerbaijani education, UDL, linguodidactics, English language teaching.*

Аннотация. Статья рассматривает применение дифференцированных заданий в разноуровневых классах, особенно при обучении иностранному языку. На основе современных теорий дифференциации и данных образовательной практики анализируется роль таких заданий в обеспечении баланса между уровнем подготовки учащихся. Приводятся методические рекомендации и примеры для учителей.

Ключевые слова: *дифференцированное обучение, дифференцированное задание, разноуровневый класс, образование Азербайджана, UDL (универсальный дизайн обучения), лингводидактика, преподавание английского языка*

In contemporary schooling, including in Azerbaijan, the mixed-ability classroom has become the norm rather than the exception. Learners in the same group differ significantly in terms of prior knowledge, language proficiency, motivation, socio-economic background, and learning strategies. This diversity is especially visible in English language classes, where the co-existence of strong and weak learners, urban and rural educational experiences, and different levels of access to private courses creates pronounced heterogeneity.

Internationally, differentiated instruction has emerged as one of the central approaches to dealing with such diversity. According to C. Tomlinson, differentiation means proactively modifying content, process, and product in response to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, while maintaining common learning goals for the whole class[10, s. 113].

Azerbaijani studies show that many ESL teachers are familiar with the term "differentiated instruction" and claim to use it, but implementation is often fragmentary and influenced by traditional whole-class teaching habits inherited from the Soviet pedagogical culture. In this context, differentiated assignments – carefully designed tasks at different levels of complexity or with different modes of performance – become a key practical instrument. The central research question of this article is: *How can differentiated assignments be systematically implemented in mixed-ability classrooms to support both weaker and stronger learners in the Azerbaijani educational reality?*

2. Theoretical and methodological background

2.1. Theoretical foundations of differentiated instruction

The modern notion of differentiated instruction (DI) is strongly associated with the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson. In her widely cited book "How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms", she argues that teaching in diverse classrooms must move away from the "one-size-fits-all" model and towards a flexible design where tasks are adjusted while curriculum goals remain common. DI is not reduced to ad-hoc simplification; it is a systematic approach in which teachers plan variation in advance and base it on assessment of learner readiness [9, s. 11-14].

The conceptual foundation of DI is closely linked to L.Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), according to which learning is most productive when tasks are slightly beyond the learner's independent performance and are supported through scaffolding. In a differentiated classroom, assignments are calibrated so that each learner operates within their own ZPD rather than at a uniform level appropriate only for the "average" student [4, s.67].

Constructivist perspectives further reinforce this logic. J. Piaget's idea of cognitive conflict and J. Bruner's notion of scaffolding and spiralled curriculum suggest that learners benefit from tasks that provoke re-structuring of existing knowledge and that revisit core concepts at increasing levels of complexity [7, s 89].

Differentiated assignments make this "spiralling" concrete: stronger students may work with more abstract or authentic tasks, while others receive more guided, concrete tasks addressing the same concept.

2.2. Universal design for learning and DI

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) proposes that curricula should offer multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, so that barriers to learning are minimized from the outset. T.Hall, G.Vue, N. Strangman, and A. Meyer view DI and UDL as complementary: UDL provides structural principles, while DI offers classroom-level strategies for varying tasks[6,s. 76].

From an Azerbaijani perspective, UDL is not yet institutionally established, but empirical work (e.g., on the limited but growing use of UDL elements by ESL teachers) shows that the principles of offering alternative input (visual, auditory), varied activities, and multiple output formats are gradually entering classroom practice.

2.3. Mixed-ability grouping: international and Azerbaijani discussion

Recent research by G. Eyyubova situates mixed-ability grouping (MAG) within broader theoretical discussions about social constructivism, social comparison, and the Big-Fish-Little-Pond effect, showing that heterogeneous groups can foster collaboration but also create tensions in terms of self-concept and motivation. For Azerbaijan, where class sizes can be large and syllabus pressure is high, these tensions are especially visible in upper-secondary classes preparing for high-stakes examinations. Several local and regional studies indicate that Azerbaijani teachers see the necessity of adapting tasks to learner differences but face difficulties with time, materials, and assessment systems. This makes the methodological design of differentiated assignments not just desirable but structurally challenging[1, s.539-551].

2.4. Methodology

This paper is based on a narrative analytical review rather than empirical data collection. The methodology includes:

● critical reading of seminal DI and UDL sources (Tomlinson; Hall et al.; Watts-Taffe et al.; Subban) [12, s.303-314],

● examination of recent Azerbaijani and regional research on English language teaching methods, differentiated instruction, and mixed-ability classes, integration of practical examples from language teaching, reconstructed and generalized in order to avoid any copying of concrete classroom materials.

The aim is not to repeat existing descriptions, but to reinterpret them analytically from the point of view of an Azerbaijani linguist concerned with communicative, cognitive, and socio-cultural dimensions of language education.

3. Mixed-ability classrooms as a linguodidactic reality

3.1. Sources of heterogeneity

In many Azerbaijani schools and universities, mixed-ability arises from several factors:

● Different educational trajectories – learners may come from traditional grammar-translation environments or from more communicative, private language courses.

● Unequal access to resources – urban students might have access to language centres, foreign textbooks, and online platforms, while rural students rely mainly on the state curriculum and limited materials.

● Varied exposure to English outside school – some learners watch English-language media and follow social networks; others use the language only in lessons.

● Individual cognitive and affective differences – working memory, processing speed, anxiety level, and motivation differ, influencing performance even when formal "level" is the same.

From a linguodidactic point of view, these differences produce "micro-contexts" inside one classroom: for the same task, one learner may be in a comfort zone, another in ZPD, and a third in an anxiety zone. Differentiated assignments aim to reposition learners so that most of them work near their ZPD rather than at extremes.

3.2. The role of national curriculum and exam culture

The national curriculum in Azerbaijan emphasizes competency-based learning, communicative language use, and learner-centred methodologies, yet the university entrance exam remains heavily test-oriented. This creates a dual pressure on teachers: they must prepare students for standardized tests while also developing communicative competence and higher-order thinking. Here differentiated assignments can play a mediating role: lower-tier tasks may focus on key exam-type items (e.g., controlled grammar, vocabulary), while higher-tier tasks emphasize critical reading, extended writing, and oral argumentation. Properly designed, such assignments allow teachers to address exam demands without completely sacrificing communicative and cognitive goals.

4. Differentiated assignments as a core mechanism

4.1. Levels of differentiation: macro, meso, micro

Analytically, differentiated assignments can be considered on three levels:

● Macro-level – sequences of assignments across the unit or semester (e.g., some students complete an extended project, others a shorter portfolio).

● Meso-level – differentiation within a single lesson (e.g., tiered reading or writing tasks).

● Micro-level – moment-to-moment variation (e.g., individual scaffolding questions, optional challenge items). Tomlinson's work implies that effective differentiation must operate at all three levels; otherwise teachers risk cosmetic adjustments that do not seriously change learning trajectories. Azerbaijani empirical studies on physics and primary education show similar conclusions: when differentiation is limited to occasional "easy" tasks, its impact remains minimal[11].

4.2. Analytical model: readiness (content, process, product)

For practical purposes, an Azerbaijani linguist-teacher can imagine a matrix with learner readiness levels on one axis (emerging – developing – advanced) and three DI dimensions on the other: content, process, product.

- Content – what texts, grammar items, or topics are used.

- Process – how students engage with the material (individual/group, visual/verbal, guided/independent).

- Product – how students demonstrate what they have learned (test, essay, presentation, poster, digital artifact).

Differentiated assignments arise when we deliberately locate each student in a cell of this matrix and design tasks accordingly, while keeping the objective of the lesson the same for the whole group.

5. Methodological organization and examples

5.1. Example 1: Reading lesson in a mixed-ability group.

Objective: All students identify the main idea and supporting details in a short expository text on "Environmental problems in the Caspian region."

Diagnostic stage: Before the main lesson, the teacher gives a short diagnostic reading (150–200 words) with 5 multiple-choice questions. Based on results and classroom observation, learners are grouped into three readiness bands.

Differentiated assignments (content + process):

Group A (emerging readers)

Receives a 250-word adapted text with simplified syntax and highlighted topic sentences.

Task 1: match headings to paragraphs (scaffolded recognition of main ideas).

Task 2: fill in a partially completed graphic organizer (cause–effect chart).

Group B (developing readers)

Works with a 350-word text close to the original, with glossed difficult words.

Task 1: underline topic sentences and write one-sentence summaries.

Task 2: classify details into "local" vs. "global" environmental problems.

Group C (advanced readers)

Reads the authentic 500-word article.

Task 1: identify the author's stance and implicit assumptions.

Task 2: prepare two critical questions to discuss in plenary.

Common product: each group produces a short oral report answering the same guiding question: *"What are the main environmental challenges mentioned and why are they important for Azerbaijan?"*

From an analytical angle, this example shows that differentiated assignments do not reduce expectations; rather, they adjust textual complexity and cognitive operations so that each learner can meaningfully participate in a shared academic discussion. This aligns with findings that DI-based reading instruction can maintain high standards while reducing frustration in mixed-ability groups.

5.2. Example 2: Vocabulary and speaking (secondary school, Grade 7)

Objective: Use everyday vocabulary for "shopping and services" in short dialogues.

Diagnostic stage: Learners perform a quick role-play; the teacher notes who relies heavily on L1, who uses limited phrases, and who experiments with more complex structures.

Differentiated assignments (process + product):

Tier 1 (support + high structure) Students receive dialogue frames with missing phrases (e.g., "Can I help you?" / "I would like …").They practice with a partner and record their dialogue on a mobile device.

Tier 2 (semi-structured) Students receive a "role card" (customer / shop assistant) with communicative intentions but no fixed wording.

They must negotiate the dialogue and include at least three target phrases.

Tier 3 (extended, creative) Students prepare a short "complaint situation" and improvise a dialogue including politeness strategies and justification.

Again, all students are later assessed with the same rubric (appropriate vocabulary, interaction, intelligibility), but paths to reach the product differ. This kind of assignment reflects international research on DI in language classes and resonates with teachers' gradual move from grammar-translation to more interactive methods.

5.3. Example 3: Cross-curricular project (upper-secondary)

In a higher-level context, differentiated assignments can be embedded in a longer project, for example, "English-language media and cultural image of Azerbaijan."

Some students (advanced) may analyse English-language news websites and produce a critical essay.

Others (intermediate) might create a bilingual poster summarizing positive and negative representations in simple language.

Emerging learners could focus on vocabulary and phrases used in headlines and prepare a mini-glossary with examples.

All contributions are combined into a class "mini-conference," illustrating how differentiated tasks can converge into a shared intellectual product. Such integrative design reflects the idea, expressed in both international and national literature, that differentiation should support inclusion rather than isolate weaker learners.

6. Analytical discussion of challenges

6.1. Teacher workload and professional identity

Both international and local studies converge on the conclusion that designing high-quality differentiated assignments is time-consuming and cognitively demanding for teachers.

Many teachers already work with large classes and heavy teaching loads; hence they experience differentiation as an additional burden rather than as a natural part of planning.

From a linguodidactic perspective, this tension is partly conceptual. If differentiation is perceived as creating "three separate lesson plans," it becomes unsustainable. If it is reconceptualized as systematic variation within one coherent lesson, using templates (e.g., "always three levels of reading" or "choice of two products"), the workload becomes more manageable. Teacher education programmes, therefore, should not only present DI theoretically but also train future teachers to design re-usable assignment patterns.

6.2. Perceptions of fairness among students

Research on MAG indicates that social comparison processes can lead to feelings of inferiority among weaker students and boredom among stronger ones.

In the Azerbaijani context, where grades and exam scores are culturally salient, differentiated assignments may initially be interpreted as "unfair" privileges[2, s.250-257].

Analytically, this is a question of assessment culture. If the teacher explains that all learners are working toward the same objectives and are assessed with the same criteria, but tasks are adjusted to provide appropriate challenge, students gradually come to see differentiation as a way to help each person show their best performance. Reflection activities—short discussions about learning goals, self-assessment checklists—can help learners internalize this view.

6.3. Risk of "pseudo-differentiation"

Another risk is superficial differentiation, when teachers change only the quantity of work (e.g., strong students receive more exercises, weak students fewer) without adjusting cognitive demand or providing alternative paths to understanding. P. Subban's research warns that such pseudo-differentiation does not significantly influence achievement and may even reinforce inequity[8, s. 165].

For Azerbaijani linguodidactics, it is crucial to emphasize qualitative differentiation:

- different genres of texts rather than just different lengths,
- different support tools (glossaries, graphic organizers, sentence starters),
- different modes of output (oral vs. written, multimodal presentations), while keeping high expectations for all.

6.4. Alignment with state standards and exams

Finally, there is the perennial question: Will differentiated assignments help or hinder exam preparation? Evidence from literacy research suggests that when DI is grounded in clear standards and continuous assessment, it can actually accelerate progress, because students spend more time working at the appropriate level of difficulty.

For the national educational context, this implies that exam-oriented tasks such as gap-fills and multiple-choice items can be integrated into differentiated assignments as one layer, while more advanced tasks support broader communicative and analytical objectives.

Implementing differentiated assignments in mixed-ability classrooms is not a temporary methodological trend but a response to the deeper structural realities of local schooling: diverse learner profiles, the coexistence of traditional and modern teaching approaches, and the dual pressure to develop communicative competence while meeting high-stakes

examination requirements. The theoretical perspectives considered in this article – including C. Tomlinson's differentiation framework, UDL principles, and sociocultural and constructivist theories – together with empirical findings from international and local research, highlight several essential points:

Mixed-ability grouping is an unavoidable aspect of contemporary schooling; the central issue is how instruction is organized within it. Differentiated assignments offer a practical mechanism for addressing learner variability without compromising shared curriculum goals. Effective differentiation relies less on isolated techniques and more on teachers' professional judgement, reflective practice, and institutional support systems.

These conclusions point to a need for teacher preparation programs to focus on the design, analysis, and improvement of differentiated assignments, especially in foreign language instruction where learner differences are particularly pronounced. Training should combine theoretical understanding with micro-teaching, collaborative lesson planning, and systematic reflection on real classroom cases.

Overall, when grounded in sound theory, supported by thoughtful methodology, and adapted to contextual realities, differentiated assignments can transform the mixed-ability classroom into an environment that is inclusive, communicatively purposeful, and cognitively enriching for all learners.

Relevance of the problem .The issue of differentiated assignments in mixed-ability classrooms remains highly relevant because contemporary language classes increasingly consist of learners with diverse proficiency levels, learning backgrounds, and cognitive styles. The growing emphasis on communicative competence and learner-centered instruction further highlights the need for flexible task design. Addressing this problem ensures that instructional practices correspond to current educational demands and real classroom conditions.

Scientific novelty of the problem. The scientific novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach, combining international differentiation models with methodological requirements specific to the local educational context. The research offers a new analytical perspective by examining differentiated assignments not only as pedagogical techniques but also as structured tools for managing heterogeneity in foreign language learning. Additionally, the study proposes original task models that demonstrate qualitative differentiation in practice.

Practical significance of the problem. The practical significance of the study is reflected in its immediate applicability for teachers who work with mixed-ability groups and need concrete methods for adapting instruction. The differentiated task models presented in the research can serve as ready-to-use frameworks for lesson planning, formative assessment, and classroom management. Implementing these strategies can improve learner engagement, increase instructional efficiency, and support more equitable language development.

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