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DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION WITH MATHEMATICS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY SEMINARS: DIDACTIC GAME AND INDIVIDUAL WORK

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Abstract: *The aim of the present paper is to exemplify, analyse and prove the utility of various strategies of differentiated instruction used within Mathematics and English Language Teaching Methodology seminars, as instruments in the teaching process of the two subjects. The focus of this research is on the didactic game, as an extremely resourceful means of successfully implementing differentiated instruction when preparing future teachers, thus helping them understand, by a double motivated approach, the usefulness of such a strategy in classroom teaching. The paper ends with the conclusions drawn from comparing the two practical first-hand seminar experiences of the authors, under the form of a comparative analysis.*

Key words: *strategies of differentiated instruction, didactic game, individual work, teaching methods.*

1. Introduction

When simply considering the history of teaching methods and practices, irrespective of the subject-matter taught, the teacher was considered, at the beginning of the whole process of identifying and establishing teacher roles, the main source of information for a particular discipline, pouring meaning and knowledge into what was commonly referred to as 'empty-headed recipients' (West, 1992), the nowadays pupils, students or candidates to learning. Once the 'communicative approach to teaching' (West, 1992) emerged and started to enforce the supremacy of the *why*, *what for* and *where* more than that of 'magister dixit' and laboratory samples with no practical usefulness, the teachers understood that they have to renounce their high position on pedestals and join roles close to those of their students, reconsider the necessity of the whole process of teaching and start analysing it also from the position of learning and assessing. Thus, roles such as: organiser of the class, participant in the lesson taught and initiator of activities, resource provider, investigator, motivator and confidence builder (Champeau de Lopez, 1989)

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have emerged and have supported the methodology of the process of teaching until these modern days.

Moreover, due to the democratization of knowledge access, the teacher's role has become dramatically reduced, as he/she becomes an organizer, a guide to learning, providing the students with a real 'learning experience' instead of the traditional 'transmission of knowledge'. Each group member can freely express their opinion, gaining self-confidence and becoming useful to the whole group. Each individual has the opportunity to be in the shoes of the others and to compare himself/herself to them. Along with the inclusion of students with different disabilities in the regular classes of the mainstream education, the diversity of individual learning needs has increased as well and, in order to cope with them, the teachers must learn to turn to new techniques through which they can provide high scholar achievements for all students. (Raftu, 2016, p.84)

Thus, an essential principle to ensure the success of and to cater for the individual needs of each and every student, as well as to offer the appropriate context for the students to achieve their personal best performances as close as possible to their intellectual potential, is represented by the concept of differentiated teaching and personalised tutoring.

However, differentiating and customizing when teaching, adapting and adjusting to individual styles and rhythms have all been sensitive issues ever since the concepts came into being and represent and old problem in methodology even now, but, at the same time, continue to challenge the teaching contexts and may represent the best solutions especially when placement tests, for example, at the beginning of a teaching situation, signal the fact, the class is heterogenous and impossible to master at only one level of knowledge. Another reason why these methods might produce better results derives from the fact that people are not alike not only from the point of view of their cognitive processes, but also from that of the learning skills, pace and attitude they activate when it comes to it (Jinga, 2005).

Differentiated work constitutes a safe way of improving students' performance in class. As a result of our experience, working in a differentiated manner with our students within the Mathematics and English Language Teaching Methodology seminars involved choosing the appropriate scientific content as well as the right teaching strategies in order to fit the individual-student learning skills and needs and their adaptation to the students' particularities, characteristic features and learning profiles.

Individualising with Mathematics and English Language Teaching Methodology seminars needs to address all the students, irrespective of their relative level regarding the subject matter taught. Because, by all means, according to the core intention and definition of differentiated instruction, the students with a relatively good and high level of knowledge are targeted to reach the next level of knowledge, while for the candidates to learning with a relatively lower level of instruction, this approach is meant to help them progress at their own pace but in an obvious and steady manner, making them attain at least the minimum requirements included in the syllabus, if not even stimulate them towards achieving either a personal best or even better results as before, considering that the competition is based on equality with peers, thus being self-motivating and self-motivated, instead of being focused on an uneven race with unattainable scores, on the one hand, and interior frustration, on the other hand.

Considering Dottreus' principle (1970) regarding individualised work, this one consists not in all students solving the same task individually, but in choosing for each student the

specific work, adapted to each individual. This type of work represents, at the same time, the appropriate means of preventing failure with mediocre and weak students, as well as ensuring progress for good students.

The driving reason behind the decision to work with the concept of differentiated instruction at our Mathematics and English Language Teaching Methodology seminars had a double motivation, extremely practically grounded: the first one derives from the fact that at the beginning of each and every new year of study, when we meet the new generation of students that we will work with for at least 3 years, their relative levels of knowledge differ very much and, as a result, there are numerous situations when we ask ourselves what types of practical materials we could bring to class in order for all the needs to be catered for. This has been the case for many consecutive years, as proven by a recent survey, undertaken by one of the authors of the present study in the previous university year, according to which, in what the progress of the students was concerned as a result of working from the same materials and at the same pace, the situation needed improvement from the point of view of the assessment step criterion of the teaching process.

Thus, for the subject called Applied English Grammar, the facts and figures showed that, out of a total number of valid student-subjects of 27, enrolled in their first year of study with the Applied Modern Languages section belonging to the Faculty of Letters, majoring in German and French, but both in combination with English as their minor specialty, 15 students evolved from the point of view of the knowledge taught, leant, and tested, 9 regressed, while 3 maintained their initial level, without registering either an evolution or a regression. Mention should be made that the performance of the students was subjected to an initial placement test, which established the relative language level at the beginning of the teaching process, measuring their background knowledge they had been equipped with prior to being exposed to specialized content teaching at university and finished with an attaining/achievement type of a test, at the end of the semester, after they had participated in the practical course mentioned before. Consequently, these assessment results, but most of all their interpretation, as each student could be measured against his/her own learning performance, led us to the conclusion that differentiated teaching might represent a better solution in order for more students to be listed next to the progress figure instead of the one indicating regress, with an additional aim of not dealing with learning situations in which students cannot be determined to leave their comfort zones and progress. One last observation regarding the above data refers to the fact that both the tables containing the analysis of the situation under discussion and the tests administered at the beginning and at the end of the teaching unit can anytime be presented as proof of evidence, upon request.

For all of the above, but also because the situation described at the beginning of the previous paragraph resulted, for a couple of years, in decisions based on the inspiration of the teacher, as we wrongly assumed and considered that standardisation was the process we had to aim at, as well as because both subjects under discussion, Mathematics and English, even though different as areas, are of utmost importance in schools when it comes to institutionalised education in Romania, we decided to address the individual professional background problems of our students. In this way, we could correct on the way all possible knowledge gaps that different students may have come with, considering their prior formation, dependent on so various teaching styles, levels of education and targets nationwide, in order to make sure that the future professionals we shape, as

teachers of these two subjects, can guarantee the quality of their teaching career from their very first year back in schools, as specialists in the fields they graduate from.

The second reason has a meta-professional implicature, as it takes into consideration the process of teaching in itself, with all the methods and techniques that it involves, as well as the type of content taught with the two seminars, thus teaching our students the ways in which, as future teachers themselves, they can apply the concept of differentiated instruction as a teaching tool in class, to work with different levels of knowledge within the same class, but this time having them as direct subjects who can, in this way, not only directly benefit from it by improving their own knowledge gaps, but also learn this methodological concept in order to be able to implement it in their own classes whenever necessary, as teachers.

Subsequently, from the moment we decided to use differentiated instruction with our seminars, we started projecting and designing our teaching by means of didactic projects using interdisciplinarity, didactic games, interactive methods, independent work notes on groups in accordance with the level of the groups, applied and practical activities tailored for the level of the groups and, at the same time, we raised creativity in our students (Richards, 2013) as a modality to stimulate and increase our students' interest in both subjects considered for observation (Purcaru, & Nechifor, 2016), we encouraged students to work at their own pace by providing them with appropriate materials and by applying differentiated teaching methods, and we included differentiated assessment techniques at the end of the process or even during the semester, in order for us to be able to consider strategies for improvement in due time.

In this way, we wanted to succeed in reducing the percentage of university dropouts and failure which many times come as a result of either treating all students in an undifferentiated manner or, in a reversed way, as a result of treating equally all situations which would require a more in-depth attention and which lead to widening the gaps in our students' knowledge and the differences between them.

2. Teaching-learning Methods used as Differentiated Instruction Strategies with the Mathematics and English Language Teaching Methodology Seminars

Of all the strategies that can be used in a differentiated manner, the teaching-learning methods employed can be ranked on a first position. According to what Vălcan says, "Efficient learning presupposes the involvement, the active participation of the one who learns in the act of learning, the method playing here an important role." (Vălcan, 2013, p. 63) Thus, our attention will be further on focused on analysing some of the teaching-learning methods that we used from the point of view differentiated instruction both with the Mathematics and with the English Language Teaching Methodology seminars, such as: didactic game and independent work, which will make the interest of the present paper and the interactive methods of brainstorming, cube, mosaic, starbursting, quadrans, and RAI which will all be submitted to detailed analysis in our next research paper.

2.1. Means of using the Didactic Game as a Strategy of Differentiated Instruction

This section is meant for familiarising the reader with the notions related to using the didactic game as a method of differentiated instruction with the Mathematics and English Language Teaching Methodology seminars. By means of using this technique, new

information can be easier assimilated and theoretical aspects can be put into practice by all the students irrespective of their knowledge levels in these two subjects. The didactic game can be used both in the content learning classes, but also in the methodology teaching classes and, as we mentioned in the introductory section, the choice of working with this concept at the Mathematics and English Language Teaching Methodology seminars was double motivated and well decided. A further distinction can be made regarding the content learning classes, where the didactic game can be used for all types of activities: acquiring new information, teaching skills, reviewing or, even, assessing, although quite rarely with the last one. Moreover, the didactic game can be used in a differentiated manner as a moment within a lesson, or it can be integrated within a stage or as a complement to it, as it can generate a lot of interest on the part of the students and can work as a 'captatio benevolentiae' strategy. Furthermore, the didactic game can also be employed to ensure feedback, as a modality to measure performance, as well as, even though more rarely than for assessment, it can also serve as a modality in itself, isolated and not integrated.

Of all the above-mentioned situations in which the didactic game can be used, we will start describing a few, and we will draw conclusions and recommend further use and possible improvement for each, depending on what we came across while applying and working with it in class.

Thus, we considered three possible ways in which the didactic game could be used in class from a differentiated instruction point of view, but other combinations or variations are not excluded, depending on the real context of the class.

One way to work with it is by using, simultaneously, its basic version (A) and the derived complex one (B). Each student participates in this game individually, and, depending on his/her level of knowledge, he/she will receive from the teacher the card containing either variant A or variant B.

For exemplification, we can refer to the type of exercise called 'Compose and solve' aimed at cultivating all students' creativity (irrespective of their level of knowledge in Mathematics or English), by means of creating and then solving mathematical problems in two ways or generating task environments for essay topics in English and writing the essays in two different manners, depending on the structure they find more logical and understandable to them. In this manner, performance can be obtained, self-motivation can be fuelled (Dörnyei, 2001) and self-respect and progress can result at the end, at individual level. As didactic materials involved, cards for all students can be distributed, containing a rubric phrased at a medium level of difficulty, while the game elements can consist of individual competition and applauses. The rules of the game are as follows: the teacher distributes the cards to the students individually, according to their level of knowledge, in this way: card A to those with a lower level and card B to those with a higher level. After 20 minutes, the mathematical problems composed or the task environments created for the essay topics are read by students who received either cards A or B, equally. For the Mathematics class, the green board can be divided into two parts, for problems belonging to both categories and the solving stage of the problems is managed in terms of both types of cards, again equally. For the English class, students are asked to phrase the requirement for writing the essay according to the three possible types of structures of essay-drafting and to hand in the essay on the occasion of the next seminar for verification, as are also asked to do the students in the Mathematics class, in their turn, regarding their own cards. The students who worked correctly are applauded.

A clear example of a card A rubric (the basic version) can look like this, for Mathematics: 'Compose a problem and solve it in two ways, according to the following literal formula: a x (b - c) ='. For a card B text (the complex variant), the example could sound like this: 'Compose a problem and solve it in two ways, according to the following literal formula: a x (b - c) + a : (b + c) ='. In what English is concerned, examples for the two types of cards can be as follows: for type A: 'Imagine you have been part of a debate on a topic of your interest and you took one of the sides. Create the topic, provide some background for it and refer to your position in two possible ways, according to the two possible structures of opinion-essay writing, then write your essay.' As for type B: 'Imagine you have been part of a debate on a topic of your interest and a conclusion has already been reached. Refer to the causes which may have led to the problem described and also to the solutions that can be brought to solve the problem and write your essay in two possible ways depending on the way you can structure, distribute and organise the information per paragraphs for this type of discourse.'

The homework will be assigned to the students still differentiated, according to the group they belonged to in class and to the model they composed and solved in class, and could consist of the same task.

Another way in which the didactic game can be applied in a differentiated manner is that when the basic variant of the game is suggested for the whole class, participation of the students is individual in what the task solving is concerned, but differentiation occurs when the quicker and better prepared students finish applying themselves to the task in a shorter period of time and they can receive an additional task, based on the same one just finished, at a more complex level.

In practical terms, this can be achieved by distributing first of all the type A cards to all the class and afterwards the first students to finish before the indicated time is over will be allotted the type B cards in order for them to deal with the more complex task, as well.

Last, but not least, another way of working with the didactic game according to a differentiated approach takes into account the modality in which the students can be divided into groups depending on their different levels of knowledge, starting from the type of subjects they dealt with in the Baccalaureate exam, especially in what Mathematics is concerned: M1, M2, M3, etc. For English, the bands obtained in the competencies test or the results obtained in the international language exams that were used as equivalents in the Baccalaureate exam can be used to sort the students into relative language groups and for each team a particular didactic game can be assigned, corresponding to the level of knowledge of the participants in that group. For example, the low-level group can receive the basic variant of the game, and the one or ones of a higher level/levels can be distributed the more complex variants of it, or all groups can be distributed completely different games depending on how great the gap is between the levels and the existing requirements.

As a real example, the whole class is divided into two homogenous groups: the students who solved in the Baccalaureate M1 and M2 types of Mathematics subjects will be given the type B card, while the others will form the other team to whom type A cards will be assigned. Similarly, the students who, in the Baccalaureate exam scored B2/C1 as bands evaluating their language skills will receive the type A cards, while the rest of them having scored C2 will be provided with the B type of cards. The reward can consist in applauding the winning team who must have, by the end of the time limit, the highest number of problems composed and correctly solved, or the best written task environments

created for the essay topics, as well as at least one essay correctly structured, drafted and proofread, in class, by the deadline.

Probably the most interesting way in which the didactic game can prove its appropriateness from the point of view of the differentiated instruction concept, even though rarely used and extremely difficult to implement, takes into account the last step of the teaching process, the one referring to assessment. 'Assessment items relay race' is a didactic game aimed at renewing and reviewing knowledge for evaluation. The didactic task, in this case, would be the formulation of testing items to be used for assessing different types of content. The didactic materials can consist of two bags filled with notes containing questions from the lesson unit, of different levels of difficulty. The methodology regarding the construction of the items follows the antonymic pattern of easy-difficult, thus one of the bags being equipped with medium tailored questions, while the second one would contain more difficult questions. The game elements could refer to applauses and movement and the reward, applied to the winning team who will have written on the green board the biggest number of correct answers, could consist of applauding the members of this group.

The rules of the game start with the teacher dividing the class into two groups and with him/her having the two bags with rubrics addressing the two levels of knowledge already prepared. The teacher starts the competition between the two groups by asking students from each group to come in front of the class, extract cards with rubrics from one of the bags corresponding to the level of knowledge each student belongs to and when the teacher signals the beginning of the process, both students open the cards at the same time, read the requirements in silence, solve the task mentally, using knowledge from both curriculum areas (i.e. Mathematics/English and Methodology), write on the green board the testing item resulted in the column allotted to their group and then go back to their places in order for other colleagues from their groups to relay the race until there is no one left in each group. The process is repeated in the same manner and, at the end, all the items that have a faulty construction will be read aloud by the teacher in order to be corrected on the spot together with the members of the groups.

Some examples of rubrics meant to generate items for evaluation are as follows: For the medium level in Mathematics, 'Write an objective multiple-choice item based on "Measurement units and instruments", 3rd grade.' or 'Write a fill-in semi-objective item based on "Intuitive elements of Geometry", 3rd grade.' For the same level, but in English, 'Build an objective multiple-choice cloze item based on irregular plural nouns, as presented by the students' book of the 5th grade.' or 'Build a semi-objective rephrase item based on the second rule of "if clause", as presented by the students' book of the 7th grade.' For the high-level group in Mathematics, the rubrics may sound like this: 'Create a pair type of an objective item, to assess the formation of the specific competence regarding the identification and use of the regular measurement units for length, capacity, mass, as well as of some adequate instruments, for the 2nd grade.' or 'Create a semi-objective item of the type open-ended question, to assess the formation of the specific competence regarding the use of some designations and symbols in Mathematics (tot, total, the elements of a tot, remainder, rest, subtractive, subtractor, composition, the factors of a composition, ratio, dividend, divisor, <, >, =, +, -, x, :) for solving and/or writing problems for the 2nd grade.' In what English is concerned, the teacher can ask students to 'Write a matching objective item, focused on the specific cognitive aim of teaching compound adjectives, starting from independent known words placed on two

columns and paring them to form coherent adjectival compounds, based on the workbook of the pupils in the 8th from'.

2.2. Independent Work used as a Strategy of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction with students can be efficiently obtained with both Mathematics and English Language Teaching Methodology by also using differentiated independent work, in what seminars, lectures and homework assignment are concerned, even though in different degrees. Establishing differentiated homework, for example, must be based on acknowledging each student's skills, but, more importantly, on the recurrent types of mistakes that each makes, in order for the home drills to be customized in point of error correction. This would definitely presuppose, on the part of the teacher, rigorous evidence involving individual cards containing a mini-profile of each student and his/her characteristic type of gaps in knowledge.

The three typical forms of organising the activity with a course or a seminar are: lockstep, individual and on groups/in pairs. Ensuring the desired student-performance can be obtained by harmoniously combining the last two types of class management, in particular, because, usually, the lockstep approach is dedicated to the parts of the lesson when the teacher imparts new knowledge to the class, explains what the students haven't understood, solves various items and problems or enlarges upon the requirements of the tasks that need to be solved by the students either by means of cards, projects or as homework, as well as the criteria according to which evaluation will be carried out, in this way not inviting too much participation from the students. It is only after this stage that the students can become active and individual differentiated work can be implemented with the aim of creating skills and abilities and reviewing and structuring information for assessment. Thus, in order to meet the seminar-targets, the individual work can be infused in this way: individual work with common topics for all the students in the group, individual work with topics differentiated according to the level of the groups, individual work with individual tasks for each and every member of a group, also called personalised or individualised work, this proving that individual work can be assigned to students either individually or in groups or pairs.

An appropriate and often used instrument with individual differentiated work can be the independent work cards. For the students naturally endowed with special skills, either content or methodology related, supplementary tasks can be assigned when they have finished solving the regular task. The complementary exercises can be applied in terms of content difficulty, volume, intellectual effort, and time limit.

However, as stated before, this involves supplementary effort on the part of the teacher as well, as he/she needs to prepare in advance, all the time, compensatory cards in order to be able to cater for the special needs of students' different levels. While working independently, the teacher helps the students stumbling upon task solving difficulties. Cards can be made accounting for skills and abilities which have improved, but also for listing and correcting the recurrent mistakes or the lack of knowledge.

Starting from the classification issued by the Swiss methodologist Dottreus (1970), all four types of cards can be used with the Mathematics and English Language Teaching Methodology seminars: 1. Development cards for the high-scoring students, who finish solving tasks before the others, who can grasp quicker and more difficult questions and exercises, with the aim of assisting, measuring and enhancing their performance; 2.

Recovery cards, dedicated to those students who are slower in the uptake or have background gaps in their content and/or methodological knowledge, after previously identifying them; 3. Exercise cards, meant to supplement the tasks and drills recommended by the regular bibliography and 4. Self-tutoring cards, comprising new knowledge individually acquired, useful for solving the exercises or the homework dedicated to students' self-development.

An example from the Mathematics Teaching Methodology seminar, including three of the four above-mentioned types of cards, refers to the methodology of writing and solving problems. The seminar starts with the distribution of the exercise card to all the students and by indicating to them the time limit of 30 minutes. The exercise card says: 'Enlarge upon the 3rd and the 4th stages of solving the following problem: "If in each boat on a lake, persons queueing for tickets sit in fives, there remain 10 persons in the queue, and if they sit in sixes, there remain 5 boats free. How many boats are there on the lake and how many persons are queueing?"' The students who meet difficulties in solving either stage 3/solving the problem or stage 4/writing supplementary activities, will be distributed the 'recovery card' and after they complete it, they return to finish solving the exercise card.

The recovery card emphasises the fact that this problem can be solved by means of two arithmetical methods: false hypothesis or figurative or two algebrical methods: by the help of an equation or of a linear equation system. The direct task is: 'Choose one of the arithmetical methods for stage 3, while for stage 4 use any of the algebrical methods, or the unused arithmetical one to check the results.' For this problem, the supplementary activities include: verifying the results obtained, writing them down, composing another similar problem abiding by the initial model but changing its text, solving it by means of another method and writing the numerical formulae for it. Such an example can be: "'A child tries to arrange his stamps in his album. If he puts 5 stamps on each page, 10 stamps are left out of the album, while if he displays 6 stamps on each page, 5 pages remain empty. How many stamps does the child have and how many pages does the album have?' Now write a similar problem yourself!' Credit for the beauty of mathematical variation in point of creativity with problems goes to Dobrițoiu (2015).

The students who manage to finish the exercise card before the official time is up will be handed in the development card, comprising the same task, but for a more difficult problem. This one may sound like this: 'Enlarge upon the 3rd and the 4th stages when solving the following problem: "Today Delia is 5 times older than when her bother was her age. When she turns the age of her bother today, together they will be 110 years old. How old is each?"'

3. Conclusions

With any subject-matter, but more precisely with the methodology classes, the teacher should permanently be attentive to the way in which he/she proceeds with the teaching process so that all students, irrespective of their level of knowledge in that area, passionately acquire new content and make the slightest progress towards self-improvement and development. The main modality by which this result can be achieved is to use as many differentiated instruction strategies as possible. Among these, the most efficient are the teaching-learning methods, but equally useful can be the differentiated usage of the didactic techniques.

Student learning progress can be obtained, both with the Mathematics and English

Language Teaching Methodology seminars, when, to meet the desired aims for each course or seminar, the teacher uses as many times as possible didactic games, individual work, interactive methods in a differentiated manner, and accompanies all these with differentiated didactic techniques. In this way, students can actively gain knowledge, skills, and long-life abilities and even the weak ones can list satisfaction next to their task fulfilment, boosting their self-confidence and interest for methodology.

The prerequisites for all this to be successful are: developing a close professional profile of the students, correctly identifying their relative level of knowledge, their weak and strong points, their typical and recurrent errors, observing their work paces, but more importantly, their personal learning styles, which has always been and still remains a delicate topic that can and will make the interest of our future research.

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