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EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERACTIVE METHODS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL APPROACH AND DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how interactive teaching methods and differentiated, learner-centred instruction can be combined to raise the quality of foreign language education. Drawing on a review of theoretical and empirical literature, the paper describes the main interactive techniques used in language classrooms, explains the principles of individualised and differentiated teaching, and proposes a practical model for joining the two approaches. The analysis suggests that interaction increases communicative practice and motivation, while differentiation ensures that this practice is accessible and challenging for every learner. Practical recommendations for teachers are offered.

KEYWORDS

Interactive methods, language teaching, individual approach, differentiated instruction, learner motivation, communicative competence

Introduction

Modern language education is moving away from the transmission of grammatical rules and vocabulary lists towards the development of communicative competence, that is, the ability to use a language appropriately in real situations. This shift has changed the role of the teacher from a source of knowledge into an organiser of learning activities and has placed the learner at the centre of the educational process (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Two directions of pedagogical development are especially important in this context: the wide use of interactive methods and the adaptation of instruction to the individual characteristics of students.

Interactive methods engage learners in purposeful communication with the teacher, with each other and with authentic materials. Individual and differentiated approaches, in turn, recognise that learners in the same classroom differ in prior knowledge, pace, interests, learning preferences and motivation. A group activity that is stimulating for one student may be too easy or too difficult for another. For this reason, the effectiveness of interactive teaching depends to a large extent on how well it is adjusted to the needs of particular learners. The aim of this article is to analyse the contribution of both approaches and to show how they can work together in practice

The theoretical basis of interactive teaching lies in sociocultural and communicative views of learning. According to the sociocultural perspective, language develops through social interaction and joint activity, and learners progress when they receive support that is slightly beyond their current level (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Communicative language teaching adds that meaning-focused practice is essential, because learners acquire the ability to speak by actually negotiating meaning rather than only by studying forms (Brown, 2007).

Several groups of interactive techniques are widely used. The first group includes pair and group work, such as information-gap tasks, jigsaw reading, interviews and peer feedback. Cooperative learning in particular has a strong research base: when tasks are structured so that learners depend on one another and each is accountable for a share of the result, achievement, relationships and attitudes to learning tend to improve (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). The second group consists of task-based activities, in which learners use language to solve a problem, plan an event or complete a project, so that linguistic forms serve a clear communicative purpose (Ellis, 2003; Littlewood, 2004). The third group covers role plays, simulations, debates and discussions, which allow students to practise pragmatic skills such as agreeing, disagreeing, requesting and persuading. The fourth group includes game-based learning, quizzes and digital tools, which add an element of enjoyment and immediate feedback.

The reported benefits of these methods are consistent across contexts. First, they greatly increase the amount of time that each student actually speaks, compared with a teacher-fronted lesson in which only a few students answer questions. Second, they lower anxiety because learners practise in small groups before speaking in front of the whole class. Third, they support motivation by giving learners a sense of autonomy, purpose and success (Dörnyei, 2001). Reviews of research on active learning in higher education likewise indicate that learning which involves collaboration and problem solving produces better outcomes than passive listening (Prince, 2004). Nevertheless, interactive methods are not effective automatically. Poorly organised pair work may be dominated by stronger students, weaker students may remain silent, and learners may overuse their mother tongue. The quality of task design, clear instructions, defined roles and teacher monitoring therefore remain decisive (Harmer, 2007).

An individual approach means that the teacher takes into account the personal characteristics of each learner when planning and assessing learning. Differentiated instruction is a systematic way of putting this idea into practice in a class of many students. Tomlinson (2014) describes it as proactive planning in which the teacher modifies content, process, product and learning environment in response to three groups of learner characteristics: readiness, interest and learning profile. A review of the literature has shown that such adaptation is associated with better engagement and achievement in academically diverse classes (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

In language education, differentiation can take several concrete forms. In terms of content, the teacher may offer reading texts of different complexity on the same topic, or vocabulary lists of different length. In terms of process, students may work with tiered tasks, choose between visual, auditory or kinaesthetic activities, or receive scaffolds such as sentence starters, glossaries and model answers. In terms of product, learners may demonstrate the same learning goal through an oral presentation, a written report or a short video. The learning environment can be differentiated by allowing flexible grouping, so that students sometimes work with peers of similar level and sometimes in mixed-ability teams.

The starting point of differentiation is reliable information about learners. Diagnostic tests, short questionnaires on interests and goals, observation, portfolios and regular formative assessment help the

teacher to understand where each student stands and what support is required. Formative feedback is particularly valuable: large-scale syntheses of educational research rank feedback and teacher-student clarity among the most influential factors in learning (Hattie, 2009). In addition, motivational research stresses that learners need tasks that are challenging but achievable, since tasks that are too easy cause boredom and tasks that are too difficult cause frustration (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011)

Interactive methods and differentiation are complementary rather than competing. Interaction creates the conditions for rich language practice, while differentiation makes sure that every student can take part in that practice at an appropriate level. A practical model can be organised in four stages. At the planning stage, the teacher defines a single communicative objective for the whole class and identifies the differences in readiness and interest among students. At the design stage, the teacher prepares an interactive task in several versions, for example a role play in which all students discuss the same situation, but with different language support cards or different levels of required complexity. At the implementation stage, learners work in flexible groups, and the teacher circulates, listens and gives targeted help instead of explaining to the whole class. At the reflection stage, students and teacher evaluate the result using criteria shared in advance, and the findings are used to adjust the next lesson. For example, in a lesson on giving travel advice, advanced learners may negotiate a complete itinerary and justify their choices, intermediate learners may complete a partly structured dialogue, and beginners may use picture prompts and key phrases to recommend places. All groups practise the same function and then present their results to the class, so that no student is separated from the common goal. Digital platforms can support this model by providing adaptive exercises, recorded speaking tasks and instant feedback, thereby giving the teacher more time for personal support.

Several conditions affect the success of this integration. Teachers need training in task design and classroom management, because differentiated interactive lessons are more demanding to prepare. Class size and time limits can restrict individual attention, so it is sensible to begin with small changes, such as two levels of one task, and to expand gradually. Finally, assessment should recognise individual progress as well as absolute results, which helps learners to see their own development and to keep a positive attitude towards learning.

The reviewed literature indicates that interactive methods improve language learning by increasing meaningful communication, cooperation and motivation, but their full potential is realised only when they are adapted to the diverse needs of students. Individual and differentiated approaches provide the tools for this adaptation: continuous diagnosis of learners, flexible grouping, tiered tasks, varied products and timely feedback. When the two approaches are combined within a clear lesson model, classroom activity becomes both more communicative and more inclusive. Future empirical studies should test such models in different educational settings and measure their long-term effect on language proficiency and learner autonomy.

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