Differentiated Instructions in Online ESL Classrooms: Perceptions and Challenges

التّعليم المتمايز للغة الإنجليزيّة كلغة ثانية في الفصول الدّراسيّة الافتراضيّة: التّصوّرات والتّحديات

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Abstract

The researcher's aim in this qualitative study is to investigate the case of differentiated instruction cogency in ESL online learning environment widely emerged after the Corona Virus pandemic, where university instructors' online differentiated instructional strategies were examined along with the challenges those instructors encountered throughout their online classroom enactment. In this research, qualitative design is employed where participant instructors were interviewed, and their reflections were employed as data collection tools. Participants were ten ESL adult instructors from three universities in Tyre district– Lebanon. Braun and Clarke's (2015) thematic analysis is applied in this study where findings reflected many challenges in differentiated instruction in online learning such as learners' lack of motivation, time and efforts consuming, resources shortage, and creating stressful situations for both learners and instructors.

Key Words:

Individualized learning: refers to an educational approach that adapts instruction to the unique needs, interests, and abilities of each learner.

Personalized learning: is an educational approach that aims to customize learning experiences for each student based on their individual needs, interests, strengths, and learning styles.

Adaptive learning: is an educational approach that utilizes technology to tailor instruction and learning experiences to the individual needs and abilities of each learner.

Student engagement: concerns about the degree of attention, interest, participation, and enthusiasm that students demonstrate in their learning activities and academic pursuits.

Learning preferences: discuss the various ways in which individuals prefer to acquire, process, and retain information.

Instructional Strategies: are methods instructors practice to aid learners become independent, strategic learners. These strategies become learning strategies when learners independently choose the proper ones and employ them efficiently to accomplish tasks or meet goals.

الملخص

الهدف من هذه الدّراسة النّوعيّة للباحث هو التّحقيق في حالة فعاليّة التّعليم التّفاضليّ في بيئة تعلّم اللغة الإنجليزيّة عبر الإنترنت بعد جائحة فيروس كورونا، حيث تمّ فحص استراتيجيّات التّعليم التّفاضليّ عبر الإنترنت لمحاضري الجامعة بالإضافة إلى التّحديّات التي واجهوها خلال تنفيذهم للفصول الدّراسيّة عبر الإنترنت. اُستخدم التّصميم النّوعيّ

في هذا البحث حيث تمت مقابلة المحاضرين المشاركين واستخدام تفكيرهم كأدوات لجمع البيانات. كان عدد المشاركين عشرة محاضرين للبالغين في تعليم اللّغة الإنجليزيّة من ثلاث جامعات في منطقة صور – لبنان. طُبق التّحليل الموضوعيّ لبراون وكلارك (2015) في هذه الدّراسة حيث عكست النّتائج العديد من التّحديّات في التّعليم التّفاضليّ في التّعلّم عبر الإنترنت مثل نقص الدّافعية للمتعلمين واستهلاك الوقت والجهد ونقص الموارد وخلق حالات مؤلمة لكل من المتعلمين والمحاضرين.

الكلمات المفاتحة: التّعلّم الفرديّ/ التّعلّم المخصّص/ التّعلّم التّكيفي/ مشاركة الطّلاب/ تفضيلات التّعلّم/ طرائق التّدريس

I. Introduction

The Corona Virus pandemic outbreak in late 2019 has altered the entire world socially, economically, and culturally. Education has not been excluded from the pandemic's list of fatalities. As a result, education all over the world has witnessed remarkable changes in classroom practices. Thus, the methods through which learners got instruction have been entirely shifted. This truism conforms with what Dudley and Osváth (2016) mentioned earlier on how learners' traits and needs differ remarkably in relation to cultural, ethnic, linguistic, academic, socioeconomic and cognitive backgrounds. Hence, online education would impressively be a challenge to instructors, learners, as well as parents and curricula designers. This unprecedented and swift shift into online learning has imposed some pressure on instructors regarding planning efficient instructions that meet learners' novel needs. Prior to the pandemic's outbreak, many researchers recommended relying on differentiated instruction to meet the various learners' needs and individual differences in

face-to-face learning. However, it is still not sure that instructors can rely on the same practices and strategies while being involved in online instruction. The extent to which instructors go all out to rely on differentiated instruction in online lessons delivery is a hard mission to investigate. According to Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010), this should be based on some diverse sets of norms such as learners' willingness to learn, interests, learning styles, needs, experiences, life circumstances, and the learning quality. Other issues should be taken into consideration such as learners' varying needs that would need specific platforms and/ or online tools to deal with the requirements of online learning. With this existing scenario of the new trend of online learning, more principles must be added to this list of norms.

Thus, it is worth saying that instigating differentiated instruction is indispensable for instructors who seek to assist learners of diverse skill levels learn. Yet, in online classrooms practices, instructors have been confronted with many challenges. Accordingly, this study came to examine several ESL instructors' practices of differentiated instructions in online classes as well as inspecting the challenges those instructors encountered while employing differentiated instruction in their online classrooms. There is justification in literature that this research is desirable to recognize Lebanese ESL instructors' insights and the assistance they want to meet any challenges they face while being involved in online instruction. The recognition of the assistance types of instructors' need could necessarily lead curricula designers think

of some professional development and up-to-date methods of instruction that could further enhance instructors' efficient usage of differentiated instruction in online lessons' delivery.

II. Literature Review

Differentiating Instruction

Rose, Meyer, & Hitchcock, (2005) defined differentiation within a context calling it as a «universal design for learning and standardizing principles of learning using multiple representations to cater for learners regardless of ability or disability". To Rose, Meyer, & Hitchcock, (2005) instruction varies with the variety of learner's types and abilities. For instance, interactive technologies as digital whiteboards, blending videos, and interactive games can foster tactile and kinesthetic delivery and adapt different learning strategies to promote autistic learners' academic growth. According to Tomlinson (2017), differentiating instruction is defined as an approach to re-determine classroom instruction. Tomlinson (2017) mentions that with differentiating instruction teachers become able to deliver information to learners through multiple entry points. They can investigate and explore current and innovative concepts; and reach outcomes as an expression of originality. In a differentiated classroom, she clarifies that instructors intend to show three curricular elements: content, process, and product. This clarifies that differentiation is not individualized learning where specific lesson plans are prepared for each learner in the same classroom in "every subject or unit". Tomlinson (2017) states that significant learning would

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come from the instructor's work with the entire class excluding no one. She related differentiation to the instructor's aptitude "to lead rather than the necessity to rely on classroom management using rules to motivate students to learn". Tomlinson (2017) explained that a proficient instructor can motivate learners by working on individual learner's interests, "creating a culture of inquiry–based learning using self–directed learning principles". She claims that efficient "educational leadership is a measure of collaborative learning where individual and whole group activities result in a mind–set leading to a measured learning growth». According to Tomlinson (2017, the inference of this «mind–set» of differentiation has reshaped the mode of curriculum design and delivery. She adds that instructional variability paves the way for a collaborative learning environment which gives learners the chance to share their skills and information; on the one hand, and to recognize their weaknesses and shape capability to attain «learning growth», on the other hand. This view is applauded by Hattie (2018) who indicates that the way instructors mind learning and their role as professionals has a significant impact on learners' accomplishments.

Differentiated Instruction Approaches

Tomlinson (2017) discloses that instructors could practice classroom differentiated instruction through certain approaches that have origins in four central learner traits which lead to efficient differentiation of instruction: "readiness, engagement, learning profile, and flexible grouping". However, Schunk and

Zimmerman (2008) spoke about the approach of differentiating classroom instruction through learning motivations

Differentiating Instruction through Readiness

Learners' readiness is related to the match between a learner's skills, knowledge and understanding with the provided classroom task. Tomlinson (2017) defines learner's readiness as the present closeness to definite knowledge, understanding, and skills. According to Tomlinson (2017), for achieving a satisfactory connection between a learner's readiness and a definite task, the task should be a little beyond what the learner can achieve. On the other hand, Cooper (2010) reveals that although the learning objective does not alter according to learner readiness, "the degree of difficulty and the degree of complexity should be in harmony with the existing situation of the learner". For a proper designation of differentiated instruction, Tomlinson (2017) suggests that this should be "similar to using the equalizer buttons on a stereo or CD player" (p. 46). In this respect, Tomlinson (2017) suggests diverse aspects to make sure that the learners have the suitable level of challenge. Thus, she stresses that to respond to learner readiness, instructors can change materials, tasks and products in a classroom from such as changing "foundational to transformational, concrete to abstract, simple to complex, single facet to multiple facets, small leap to great leap, more structured to more open, less independence to greater independence, slow to quick". (p. 47). As for measuring learners' readiness, Strickland (2007)

explains that this should be accomplished through conducting an assessment before starting a unit of a study. These pre-assessment results are expected to help instructors to plan flexibly.

Differentiating Instruction through Learners' Engagement

It is well recognized to all instructors that any classroom does not function properly without engaging learners in the learning process, and this does not take place without creating an engaging environment. In this regard, Christenson, Reschly and Wylie (2012) explain that learners' engagement is a crucial constituent of the learning process. Tomlinson (2001) illustrates that engagement is an indispensable issue in the teaching and learning process. This enables instructors to create an operative learning environment; hence, leading to empower learners to stay on task and promote their learning aptitudes. Educators recommend that instructors should take engagement into consideration when preparing for a differentiated instruction classroom. Learners' engagement works best through two promoters, as Tomlinson (2017) illustrates. These two promoters are learner's interest and learner's choice. Yet, in any functioning classroom, it is easy to identify that not all learners have the same interests, which leads to instructors adopting differentiated instruction. On the other hand, Tomlinson (2017) proposes certain strategies to embrace learners' interest in any classroom that adopts differentiated instruction. Tomlinson (2017) indicates that instructors can involve adults or peers with

prior knowledge to function as supporters in an area of shared interest. Instructors can also provide learners with several opportunities to explore a topic or expression of learning. Tomlinson (2017) adds that instructors can offer learners a wide range of materials and technologies. They can provide learners also with a choice of tasks and products, including student designed options. Also, they can inspire exploration or application of key concepts and principles in learners' interest areas.

Differentiating Instruction through Learning Profile

Learning profile is an approach through which learners feel that they learn the best. An efficient classroom should aim to deliver a good learning experience for all learners; hence, instructors who differentiate their instruction through learning profiles think about assisting learners explore the best approach of learning for themselves. Tomlinson (2017) spoke about certain aspects that an instructor should consider when working with differentiating instruction through learning profile. These aspects might include group orientation as independent/ self-orientation, group/peer orientation, adult orientation, or a combination. Another aspect might be the classroom environment as quiet/noise, warm/ cool, still/mobile, flexible/fixed, busy/spare, etc. Tomlinson (2017) illustrates the cognitive style as another aspect. This might include creative, conforming, essence/facts, whole-to part/, part-to-whole, expressive/, controlled, nonlinear/linear, inductive/deductive, etc. Intelligence preference is another

aspect that an instructor should consider when working with differentiating instruction through learning profile. This might include, according to Tomlinson (2017), analytic, practical, creative, verbal/ linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial/visual, bodily/ kinesthetic, etc.

Differentiating Instruction through Flexible Grouping

Creating classwork homogenous groups lies in the core of the differentiated instruction approach. It is not a dissimilar class strategy; it is one of the focal principles of differentiated instruction. Conklin, Sorrel & Van Dixhorn, (2012) believe that instructors consider some significant issues when involving learners in flexible grouping such as "gender, chemistry between students, social maturity, academic readiness and special needs". Conklin et.al. (2012), on the other hand, indicate that adopting the flexible grouping approach is to create class work groups whose participants change regularly to diminish undesirable feelings, stigma and feelings of shame. Brulles & Brown (2018) show that the approach of flexible grouping assists learners and motivates instructors to regularly observe their students' challenge level. Yet, Tomlinson (2017) reveals that in classrooms with flexible grouping learners can be part of several groups or can work independently. Tomlinson (2017) indicates that these groups can be skills-based or interest-based and be both heterogeneous and homogenous at readiness level. In this regard, each participant may choose the groups he/she wants to work in, or instructors may assign them to each.

Differentiating through Learning Motivations

In a study conducted in 1996 and entitled Approach and Avoidance Achievement Goals and Intrinsic Motivation, Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) illustrated that learners could be differentiated either through "approach-performance" or "avoidance-performance". Learners that are performance orientated will try to outperform other learners with the purpose of demonstrating proficiency and preeminence. On the other hand, learners identified as "avoidance-performers" may set themselves the objective to avoid failure by appearing incompetent. However, Schunk and Zimmerman (2008) claim that motivation could take place through enabling learners to "recognize poor self-regulation, model how to set effective learning goals and implement supportive learning strategies". In a different context, Pachler (2010) shows that motivation in a differentiated instruction classroom could be enhanced through employing digital devices. For instance, Pachler (2010) illustrates that a "mobile device can be shared, peer critiqued and co-constructed, as evidence of developing critical thinking skills". Similarly, Firipis, Chandrasekaran, and Joordens (2017) argue that learners can differentiate learning through using mobile devices to "test" and "clarify" course concepts. Firipis, Chandrasekaran, and Joordens (2017) show that in many cases, learners try to find alternative methods to process and understand difficult content or to overcome a perceived barrier to their learning. Firipis, Chandrasekaran, and Joordens (2017)

recommend that curriculum designers should differentiate curricula by inspiring learners to improve critical thinking skills by researching for additional resources. For instance, "referenced readings, supportive technical knowledge and facilitate opportunities for sharing of knowledge self-sourced independently from online Internet sources using a mobile device".

III. Review of the Most Recent Research Studies

Previously conducted research studies on differentiated instruction primarily concentrated on instructors' insights and levels of efficiency concerning the hypothetical and applied sides of differentiated instruction. However, there are research papers with an emphasis on learners' improvements and perceptions. This current research reviewed some of these for the purpose of attaining a comprehensive perception of the fundamental inferences in the field of differentiated instruction. To start with, Howard and Tracey Ernst conducted a case study in 2005 where they planned a differentiated instruction classroom environment for an undergraduate course. The study intended to demonstrate the differentiated classroom traits and unveil learners and instructor perceptions of differentiated instruction implementation. The study participants were 35 undergraduate political science class. After the implementation of differentiated instruction methods throughout the course term, participants were asked to evaluate the efficiency of the implemented strategies. Findings of this case study reflected that participants

responded positively to the use of differentiated instruction. They showed an advanced level of learning and reflected their concern and satisfaction with the course. Findings also showed that instructors reacted positively to the differentiated instruction course, despite reporting worries about the time needed to differentiate instruction and whether the method of differentiation was fair for every participant. In a different context, Powers (2008) conducted a study to explore the impacts of the differentiated instruction approach on learners' motivation and achievement. Research participants were 20 high achieving Grade 7 Arlington, U.S. students (10 females and 10 males). The study lasted for two months only where participants were given the chance to study independently relying on the Powers Plan which is a research–based and field–tested method of independent study that demonstrates differentiated instruction. Powers (2008) relied on participants' reflections, questionnaires, and interviews as tools for data collection. The study findings showed that the participants' motivation and achievement improved due to the implementation of the differentiated instruction approach. Another study was conducted by Chamberlin and Powers (2010) in which the impact of differentiated instruction on mathematics understanding was assessed. It was a concurrent mixed method study with the quasi–experimental pre–test post–test design. The researchers used interviews as a tool to collect data for the purpose of analyzing participants' work and perceptions. Findings indicated that the experimental group participants who received

differentiated instruction had a better understanding in the provided mathematics course than their counterparts of the control group. In 2011, Martinez conducted action research that explored the effects of a "systematic, explicit and differentiated phonics instruction" on EFL learners' literacy skills. The research's primary concentration was on reading comprehension, spelling, and appropriate use of verbs in written sentences. Throughout the research, phonics instruction was provided with differentiation of time, instruction sequence, and vocabulary based on participants' needs. Findings indicated that differentiation and explicit phonics instruction had positive impacts on EFL learners' reading comprehension and literacy skills. Chien (2012), on the other hand, conducted action research through which differentiated instruction approaches as tiered tasks, learner's choices and numerous assessment types were applied in elementary EFL classes in Taiwan. This research's findings proved that the implementation of differentiated instruction approaches of tiered tasks, learner's choices and numerous assessment types improved participants' motivation and their sense of learning and autonomy. Similarly, Alavinia and Sadeghi (2013) conducted an experimental research study to examine the impact of differentiated instruction through learning styles on learners' English language proficiency levels. Participants of the study were 60 undergraduate freshmen students divided into two groups of 30. Throughout the study that lasted for one semester, all participants were provided with the VAK Learning Styles Self-Assessment Questionnaire

developed by Chislett and Chapman (2005). All participants studied the assigned English language course using the same book. Yet, the control group participants studied the course book by means of a traditional approach. As for the experimental group participants, they received differentiated instruction which was based on the results of the VAK test done before conducting the study. Findings revealed that there was no significant difference between the treatment and the control groups as a result of implementing differentiated instruction. In 2014, Dosch and Zidon conducted a research study that aimed to examine the efficacy of implementing differentiated instruction in information literacy classes. The study was implemented in higher education to recognize whether quantitative improvements were prominent in a differentiated classroom in comparison to a classroom that did not adopt the differentiated instruction approach. Findings showed that that participant who received differentiated instruction significantly outpaced their counterparts of the non- differentiated instruction class. Findings also showed that participants of the differentiated instruction class perceived the differentiated instruction approach positively. Later on, in 2017, Chen and Chen conducted quasi-experimental research in which they implemented the differentiated instruction approach in a college mathematics class. The research participants were 60 calculus college students, where 30 participants represented the experimental group and 30 represented the control group. Throughout the study, the control group participants received classroom instructions via the teacher-centered approach. Yet,

the experimental group participants received differentiated instruction. After conducting the post test, Chen and Chen (2017) indicated that the result indicated that there was a significant difference in calculus achievement between experimental and control groups. The experimental group participants had the chance to achieve the calculus course objectives better than their counterparts of the control group. Later, Alhasmi and Elyas (2018) piloted an experimental study with the aim of examining the impacts of providing differentiated instruction in a grammar course delivered to class. Participants were first year female students studying EFL. The experiment involved a treatment group and a control group. Throughout the intervention period, the control group participants received grammar instructions in a traditional way. Yet, the experimental group received the same grammar course but with differentiated instruction based on the participants' cognitive profile. The researchers relied on the pre- test and posttest to collect quantitative data, and interviews with students to collect qualitative data. The pre-test and post-test results reflected that there was a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test of the experimental group. However, the control group results showed no remarkable difference. Qualitative data results indicated that participants held a positive attitude towards the implemented instruction, an increase in participants' motivation, appropriateness of access, and learners' autonomy. Later, Danzi, Reul and Smith (2018) conducted action research to investigate the impact of the differentiated instruction approach

on promoting learners' motivation and decrease classroom boredom and frustration. In this action research that lasted for a period of 12 weeks, the researchers chose 21 third graders, 23 fifth graders, and 28 eighth graders as the research participants. The research tools were tiered assignments, authentic assessment types, and free-time activities which were modified in accordance with the participants' needs and interests. The researchers employed also questionnaires for participants and parents with an observation checklist. Data collected from the participants' questionnaire revealed that they showed a positive perception of the implemented differentiated instructions. A more recent study was conducted by Vargas-Parra, et.al (2018). Vargas-Parra, et.al (2018) piloted action research with a qualitative design through which they attempted to investigate the impacts of online learning differentiated instruction on ESL learners. Participants of this action research were 29 private school students. The research relied on journals as a qualitative tool to collect data. The journals were later analyzed through the use of content analysis and triangulation techniques, using Atlas.ti software. Research findings stated that differentiated instruction adopted in online learning had a positive impact on students' learning process. The differentiated instruction approach met the participants' needs and promoted their motivations. Therefore, Vargas-Parra, et.al (2018) recommended implementing differentiated instruction in EFL online classrooms because this approach can "constitute a valuable pedagogical alternative for the benefit of students".

Recently, Maria & Maria (2019) explained that meeting learners' diverse needs, primarily those who come from different cultural and social backgrounds, mandates variations in the contemporary educational curricula through the implementation of innovative classroom methods and applications, such as differentiated instruction. In their study, Maria and Maria (2019) investigated 16 studies that contributed to the differentiated instruction approach in higher education, specifically during the last ten years. The research findings showed that adopting the differentiated instruction approach contributes to "mobilizing preservice teachers, improving their performance and developing positive attitudes and beliefs of trainees and educators in higher education". As far as online learning (virtual) is concerned, there is very little research on the use of differentiation in fully online classrooms despite the huge growth in learners' enrollments in online courses at various levels. In a very recent research study, Beck, D., Beasley, J. (2021) asked online instructors from two different types of schools to discuss their online differentiation practices and compared these differentiated approaches with instructors across these schools. In this research, 92 instructors focused in 19 groups were involved. Collected qualitative data were investigated based on Tomlinson's classroom differentiated instruction framework. The research findings showed that most instructors comments about differentiation definitions, assessments, curriculum, grouping and strategies "fell in the novice category". Thus, less experienced online classroom instructors might face difficulties in developing skills while

implementing differentiated instruction approaches in virtual classrooms. In a different research study, Jørgensen & Brogaard (2021) showed that college instructors often have learners that belong to diverse educational levels. Thus, such instructors are continuously challenged with the 'one size fits all' classroom approach. In the study they conducted, Jørgensen & Brogaard (2021) attempted to investigate whether and how differentiated instruction, primarily learners' readiness, can be implemented to measure and respond to academic diversity, demonstrated by two different cases; a methods lecture series and a peer-evaluation seminar. In the study each case presented specific tools, tasks and approaches stimulated by differentiated instruction which might be simulated or employed for stimulation in alike contexts. The research results involved better accomplishment of the proposed learning outcomes, instruction that is perceived to be significant by learners and instructors, and a more comprehensive classroom environment. Also, the two cases validated the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in higher education, defying the predominant notion that differentiated instruction is not well valid in a college context.

To sum up, the conducted research studies in the last two decades have investigated the implementation of differentiated instruction in various contexts and many of these revealed promising findings in this respect such as those conducted Alavinia &Sadeghi, 2013; Alhasmi & Elyas, 2018; Chamberlin & Powers, 2010; Chen & Chen, 2017; Dosch & Zidon, 2014; Maria

and Maria 2019; Jørgensen & Brogaard 2021 which specifically focus on differentiation in higher education. Also, there are only very few (Beck, D., Beasley, J. 2021 and Jørgensen & Brogaard 2021) that investigated the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in online learning regarding higher education. This current study is intended to fill in the gap through investigating the implementation of differentiated instruction in online higher education classes and the challenges encountered throughout the learning process.

III. Methodology

Due to the Corona Virus pandemic measures and the frequent lock down periods, most learners around the world were obliged to study virtually from homes. This has mandated instructors to adopt innovative instructional approaches at that time and hence after. It becomes interesting to any researcher's mind to inspect how learners with diverse aptitudes function in such virtual classes and if instructors are equipped with the basic approaches to meet the up-to-date needs of learners. This qualitative research was conducted to meet this contemporary aspiration with the objective of surveying ESL instructors' insights and practices concerning the application of differentiated instruction in online classrooms. It also aimed to examine the challenges higher education instructors encountered while instigating online differentiated instruction. This research adopts a qualitative research design and implements semi-structured interviews to collect data. The researcher's justification for

the choice of the qualitative design is due to the assistance it could encounter in examining the issue and developing an understanding of the circumstances, perceptions, and reflections of the research participants.

A. Research Context

This qualitative research was conducted in three private universities in Lebanon where English is communicated as a first foreign language of instruction in most majors. Each of the three universities adopts an international English language course designed primarily for learners studying English as a second language based on a validated placement test that determines each learner's proficiency level.

B. Research Instruments

Adopting the qualitative design, this research relied on the semi-structured interview approach where the interviewer did not strictly follow a formalized list of questions. Instead, he asked more open-ended questions. The interviewer used the English course requirements to generate questions and conversation starters to enhance mutual communication. The semi-structured interviews with participants were headed by observations, informal and unstructured interviews to let the researcher have a profound understanding of the whole issue for the purpose of preparing the appropriate and significant semi-structured research questions. For an appropriate choice of participants, the researcher used purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling procedure where the researcher depended on on his

preference to choose variables for the sample population. Each interview took place around 45 minutes. The questions were open-ended and about the participants' teaching experience, outlooks on employing differentiated instruction, online lessons amidst the pandemic, and how their approaches and class performances affected learners' aptitudes throughout the learning process.

C. Research Participants

Participants of this study were ten university instructors who teach English as a foreign language for students in their first year where English is provided as a foundation course. The participants' age ranges from 29 to 41. Each of the designated participants had at least seven years of experience in the domain of teaching EFL and previously carried out differentiated instruction approaches in lessons delivery for at least two years. The participants were males and females. Gender was not regarded as a variable in this research.

D. Research Analysis and Discussion

This qualitative research is primarily constructed on semi-structured interviews as a cornerstone for data collection. The interviews' questions focused on the participant instructors' experience in implementing the differentiated instruction approach in their English face-to- face and online classrooms. All participant instructors experienced differentiated instruction methods in their classrooms because of continuously having learners of diverse proficiency level and various learning

styles in the same classroom. Because all participants have passed throughout this experience, the interviews' questions reflected participants' previous recognition and practice of the differentiated classroom instructions approach.

Participants' recognition of the differentiated instruction approach

The interviews questions showed that the participant instructors had a thorough understanding of the differentiated instruction approach. They recognized its concept, purpose, strategies, and challenges. They had an awareness of its necessity in any classroom to meet the needs of learners and to reach everyone in the learning classroom. According to Prast et.al. 2018, differentiated instruction perception is mandatory for any instructor who likes to include this strategy in his/her lesson plan. Otherwise, differentiated instruction tasks will be hard to accomplish. Pham (2012) referred this to regarding differentiated instruction as a blend of both theoretical perception and practical application. In this respect, all participants were aware that in the application of the different instruction tasks learners should be provided with a variety of classroom tasks to enable them to achieve the assigned learning objectives. One of the respondents (ZS) showed that, before she started with her class at the start of the semester, she identified the learners' competency levels and needs. ZS conducted a diagnostic test for this purpose based on which she decided to provide her students with more intensive writing through various procedures such as modeling, mapping, and clustering. From this exemplification, ZS revealed

that awareness of differentiated instruction gave her the chance to identify learners' needs. Similarly, instructor BE indicated that his awareness of differentiated instruction enabled him to work more properly with his students who belonged to diverse proficiency levels and dealt with each according to his/her needs. LM asserted that differentiated instruction takes place when an instructor makes classroom arrangements through grouping learners based on their likes, dislikes, and levels assigning for each group the suitable tasks and missions. Respondents' views showed the reciprocal relationship between implementing different instructional tasks and learners' diversity. In responding to the question on differentiated instruction conception, HJ linked it to instructors' implementation of a diverse package of tasks. She exemplified through talking about her reading classroom. She mentioned that some of her students "needed to practice skimming tasks and context clues in order to be able to comprehend any printed text". It was so clear that having differentiated classroom approaches was so essential to perceive the notion of differentiated instruction. For instance, Tomlinson (2014) showed that differentiated instruction can be applied by using a diversity of instructional schemes through varying content, process and product which match learners' "readiness, interests and learning profiles". Correspondingly, Turner, Solis and Kincade (2017) emphasized that instructors should consider learners' individual differences if they are interested in implementing the proper instructional plans. Thus, from the respondents' views, it can be assumed that the

differentiated instruction notion provided is suitable in terms of the significance of applying different instructional methods to meet learners' needs. In the light of participants' recognition of the differentiated instruction approach, the responses of the interviewed instructors made it clear that differentiated instruction is a key factor in addressing learners' diversity. This agrees with Tomlinson (2001) who stressed that instructors who implemented differentiated instruction must take into account learners' levels, needs and interests. Tomlinson (2015) also showed that it is all about the procedure an instructor employs to encounter the needs of dissimilar learners thus all learners within the same classroom can receive information efficiently, irrespective of their diverse abilities and motives. Learners learn better if these differences are taken into consideration, as Tomlinson (2014) asserted. Although Tomlinson (2017) indicated that instructors intend to show three curricular elements: content input (what students learn), process (how students go about making sense of ideas and information) and product or output (how students demonstrate what they have learnt), the research results showed that all participant instructors centered their perception of differentiated instruction primarily on content and process. Not a single respondent emphasized the product. In analysis, this indicated instructors' narrow awareness of the differentiated instruction concept. This might lead to the assumption that differentiated instruction is challenging to be comprehended.

Participants' implementation of the differentiated instruction approach Participants' responses to the interviews questions reflected their experience in the implementation of this method in their English classrooms. The majority of respondents reflected that they implemented this method in various content and according to various procedures based on their learners' needs and proficiency levels. Similarly, they confirmed using this approach throughout the online classroom's sessions during the pandemic lockout periods as well as during face-to-face classrooms before. In this respect, instructor (HM) stated that it was so beneficial to identify learners' needs and levels before designing any instructional plan. This was very helpful in the implementation of the differentiated instruction strategies, HM added. Similarly, HH pointed out that it assisted him make a better comprehension of many learners, and it enabled him to reach almost all of them. Also, SN reflected that "checking for learners' context understanding in an undifferentiated instruction classroom is hard to be determined". However, SN added, with differentiated instruction "it is a little bit easy to get if the same learners got their lesson well or not, primarily in classes with big numbers". Participants' responses reflected their perception of the significance of implementing differentiated instruction strategies which allowed them to meet all learners' needs. This result agrees with Tomlinson's (2005) outlook that instructors are progressively mindful that they should provide instruction differently to respond to the emergent "population of diverse students".

Challenges participants encountered with the differentiated instruction approach

With the online implementation of differentiated instruction, the instructors confessed encountering diverse challenges (other than the technical problems). One respondent (HK) indicated that learners were under the pressure of the "new classroom environment" which created stress and uneasiness for many of the learners. To specify, RH reflected negatively to online differentiated instruction due to the absence of previous training and learners' lack of motivation. She indicated that it was time consuming and there were many interruptions during the online sessions. In the same way, HK confessed that he had a limited experience with online teaching in general and differentiated instruction during online sessions in particular. He complained that many students did not take part in the designated tasks, and he had no awareness about keeping them in. This pushed him to return to the traditional class mode on many occasions. HM reflected on a challenge related to time. He indicated that the entire idea of online learning was new to learners, and differentiating instruction made it more challenging. What learners were able to accomplish during face–to–face instruction consumed double the extra time and efforts online. On the other hand, MS showed a skeptical attitude towards online differentiated tasks. She indicated that what took place during the online session (other than the technical and connection issues) did not meet her expectations. Many learners in her

class worked in an unusual manner, their reactions showed low motivation. She referred the reason to the little experience in being in an online lesson and to the absence of eye contact and proximity. In one of the interviews with LM, she spoke about learners' online attendance as a big challenge to her. ZS spoke about the same challenge and indicated that she used to plan for the online class based on the differentiated instruction approach. But when it came to session time, many did not attend. HJ, BE, and HK discussed how much effort they exerted in planning, preparing tasks and resources, and deciding on lesson procedures. They said that all these were effort and time-consuming. SN, RH, MS, and LM shared the same issue. They reflected on the difficulty of planning and organizing the work for classes with big numbers. They complained, wondering how they could meet the needs of all those learners in one classroom and within a limited class session. Other participants as HJ, BE, ZS, HM, and HH criticized online differentiated instruction methods for being stressful and efforts consuming. For instance, HM and ZS spoke about the too much effort they exerted in materials preparation and distribution of tasks. BE said that "usually the online session's duration was two hours. It took me more than five to seven hours to prepare for each session. Honestly this consumed me." Similarly, HJ and HH indicated that having a big number of students in the online session (about 35) demanded much effort and that was stressful due to difficulty to have control. HH spoke about the availability of the English course limited instructional resources. For

instance, HH showed that the course e-book was unavailable, and the assigned activities were centered around face-to-face work. Seven respondents (HK, HM, RH, LM, BE, ZS, and MS) reported the same issue indicating that finding the necessary course materials was another challenge for them. They said that the materials provided by universities where they worked were not sufficient. The available resources did not meet the learners' needs. RH said "there was a shortage of resources. The book I had was suitable to work inside the classroom in face-to-face lessons, but not for online sessions." LM had the same problem and added "It was so hard for me to find an electronic copy of the book. I scanned some lessons from the book and made the PDF copies to help my students." When it came to learners' motivation, four respondents (RH, SN, HM, and MS) pointed to the learners' negative attitudes. RH and MS indicated that many learners held a positive attitude towards the differentiated instructions during the online classroom such as working in pairs set in different digital rooms. However, SN and HM showed that some learners had a negative attitude. Many were hesitant about participation and taking part in the sessions. They "muted" themselves almost all the time and rejected to show up in most cases mainly after recognizing that all meeting sessions were "recorded".

In reference to the above illustrated challenges and based on the interviews with instructors, it could be noticed that instructors were aware of these challenges even during face-to-face

instruction. Therefore, it should be noted that such challenges must be dealt with appropriately through providing the proper strategies to confirm the application of differentiated instruction in classrooms. These challenges agreed with Lunsford (2017) and Merawi (2018) who showed that the differentiated instruction approach in online learning were often met with several challenges. Merawi (2018), specifically, referred instructors' negative attitude of differentiated instruction in online learning to the diverse challenges that encountered it such as time and efforts consuming, lack of course materials, demotivation of learners, etc.

IV. Conclusions

To sum things up, this qualitative research was conducted to investigate instructors' insight regarding the utilization of the differentiated instruction method in online learning. As far as the instructors' insight is concerned, it has been considered as a noteworthy issue prompting instructors' performance. This goes in parallel with many previously conducted studies that explored instructors' perception which have verified that there is a substantial association between instructors' rational, principles and outlooks connected with the performance and activities (Rosidah & Nurahimah, 2020). Although ample research has been conducted on instructors' insight of differentiated instruction and its implementation in classroom activities (Nicolae, 2013; Chin−Wen, 2015; Merawi, 2018; Tamirat & Xiaoduan, 2020)., little has been done on utilizing it in online

classroom work. Formerly, some educators held the concept that learners could achieve classroom instructions based on a variation of methods regardless of the change in context. In qualitative research conducted in 2018, Charles and Luard explained that differentiated instruction utilization is established when instructors recognize that differentiated instruction is indispensable in classrooms that constitute learners of various proficiency levels. Also, Mariyam et al. (2019) applauded this conception and explained that that optimistic attitude toward differentiated instruction could boost embracing diverse differentiated instruction implementations in classroom work. This suggests that adopting an affirmative insight of differentiated instruction is effective in enhancing the implementation of the differentiated instruction method in any learning environment. These previous reviews do not agree with the current situation of online learning, as this study has concluded due to the availability of diverse challenges that left their impacts on the participants' insights. Participants' reflections during the interviews made it obvious that online differentiated instructions were not positively received. Participants responses clearly reflected having an incomplete recognition of the differentiated instruction concept, mainly when implemented online. Eventually, instructors should have an obvious and precise recognition of the differentiated instruction concept if they propose to utilize it whether in face-to-face or online instruction. Even though most respondents to the interviews' questions agreed on the significance of this approach in online instruction, they confessed that it demands much more

practice to decrease time and efforts consumption. Yet, many of them revealed that with the differentiated instruction methods they were able to meet learners' needs and levels regardless of the many challenges they encountered. Results could have been better if the sample had been more representative. The research was conducted in a limited area and encompassed only ten ESL participants from three universities in Tyre district– South Lebanon. Thus, the research findings were primarily based merely on the perceptions of this limited group. For further research, therefore, the research recommends increasing the number of participant instructors, involve learners, university staff, and parents. It is also recommended to utilize other research instruments such as questionnaires and observations to achieve more validated results.

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