Exploring Student Communicative Needs and Learning Style Preferences
in Thai EFL Secondary Classrooms for Differentiated Instruction Implementation

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Abstract

This study investigated the implementation of differentiated instruction in Thai EFL secondary classrooms by examining students' communicative skill needs and identifying effective activities that accommodate diverse learning preferences. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combined learning style and learning preferences interview data from Grade 9 students in a large lower secondary school in the east of Thailand. The findings revealed that Thai EFL students require communicative skill development emphasizing real-world, functional language use rather than traditional grammar-focused instruction. Students demonstrated strong preferences for interactive activities involving speaking, idea exchange, and authentic communication. Their needs include developing fluency, critical reasoning, organized expression, and confidence in public speaking. These preferences challenge assumptions about Thai students' comfort with passive learning and indicate readiness for communicative language teaching when implemented through culturally responsive strategies. The study identified effective differentiated instruction activities including movement-based activities, debate exercises, collaborative structures, and integration of authentic materials. These activities successfully accommodated multiple learning styles while creating dynamic student-centered environments. The research demonstrates that differentiated instruction principles can be successfully integrated with communicative language teaching methodologies to create more effective and inclusive EFL learning environments. The findings suggest that culturally responsive differentiated instruction can enhance educational effectiveness and support communicative competence development that enables students to use English effectively in real-world contexts.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction (DI), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Thai EFL Students

Introduction

Differentiated instruction (DI) has gained global attention as a key strategy for addressing diverse learner needs. However, its implementation in Thai secondary EFL classrooms remains limited, with teaching still dominated by traditional, one-size-fits-all methods (Keyuravong, 2019; Foley, 2005). Despite increased awareness of learner diversity, few studies explore how DI can be effectively adapted to Thai educational and cultural contexts.

While Tomlinson's (2001) DI framework is widely applied in Western education, its relevance in Thai EFL settings is underexplored (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012). Thai students' learning style preferences and communicative needs—shaped by cultural norms such as group orientation and risk-avoidance—further complicate DI implementation (Baker, 2012).

This study addresses these gaps by examining the perceived need for DI and the learning preferences of Thai secondary EFL students. It contributes a localized perspective to DI research, offering practical insights for more inclusive, student-centered language teaching in Thai classrooms.
The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the needs for differentiating content, process, and product in the English classroom?

2. What are the learning style preferences and communicative needs of Thai EFL secondary students?

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is a responsive, student-centered teaching approach designed to address the diverse needs, abilities, and preferences of learners in today's increasingly heterogeneous classrooms. Rooted in the foundational work of Tomlinson and Allan (2000), this approach emphasizes adapting three key components of instruction—content, process, and product—based on learners' readiness levels, prior knowledge, cultural backgrounds, interests, and learning styles. Moving beyond the traditional one-size-fits-all model, differentiated instruction encourages teachers to create flexible learning environments that provide multiple pathways for students to engage with material, make sense of information, and demonstrate their understanding.

Historically, differentiation can be traced back to one-room schoolhouses, where teachers informally modified instruction for students of mixed ages and abilities (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012). Over time, these instinctive practices evolved into a research-based framework supporting inclusive and equitable education across a range of educational settings. As Rock et al. (2008) explain, differentiated instruction involves a set of pedagogical strategies that are intentionally aligned with students' prior knowledge, interests, and learning preferences. These strategies require flexible lesson planning, continuous assessment, and reflective teaching to ensure that all learners have access to meaningful, appropriately challenging, and engaging learning experiences tailored to their individual needs.

Core Principles and Elements of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction (DI) is a student-centered teaching approach that seeks to accommodate the diverse learning needs, backgrounds, and abilities of students through flexible and responsive instructional strategies. Rather than adhering to a uniform method of instruction, DI provides

multiple pathways for learning by adjusting the content, process, and product based on individual student differences. According to Tomlinson (2001), four core principles underpin this approach: concept-driven instruction, flexible grouping, adaptable use of time and materials, and ongoing assessment to inform instructional decisions. These principles are designed to maintain the integrity of the curriculum while offering personalized and meaningful learning experiences.

The three key elements of DI—content, process, and product—serve as the operational framework through which differentiation is enacted. Content refers to what students learn and is adjusted to match their readiness levels and interests, often through the use of varied texts, multimedia, or tiered assignments (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). Process describes how students make sense of the material, emphasizing diverse instructional strategies and classroom activities that align with learners' preferences and cognitive styles (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). Product focuses on how students demonstrate their understanding, encouraging a range of assessment options such as projects, presentations, or portfolios that allow for differentiated expressions of mastery (Subban, 2006).

In today's mixed-ability classrooms, which are typical in most educational settings, these principles and elements are crucial for supporting individual growth while maintaining a cohesive learning environment. Lawrence-Brown (2004) and Gregory & Chapman (2012) highlight the reality that students vary significantly in terms of age, maturity, language ability, cultural background, and prior knowledge. As such, a responsive teaching approach like DI is essential to promoting equity, ensuring that each learner receives the support and challenge they need to succeed.

Differentiated Instruction in EFL Contexts

Differentiated instruction (DI) offers vital opportunities for improving EFL teaching in diverse classrooms where students vary in proficiency, learning styles, and preferences (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Hedge, 2000). By tailoring lessons to meet individual needs, DI supports language development and learner engagement.

Learning styles—visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and reflective—are key to designing effective EFL activities (Oxford, 2011; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). For example, visual aids help visual learners, while role-plays benefit kinesthetic students. Aligning instruction with these preferences boosts motivation and language retention.

Effective DI also involves scaffolding and continuous assessment to match instruction with student readiness (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023; Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). This is crucial in Thai EFL classrooms, where students show varied English exposure and confidence (Keyuravong, 2019).

Barriers such as large class sizes, rigid curricula, and limited training hinder DI implementation (Roy et al., 2012). Teachers also need cultural awareness to meet students' diverse expectations (Baker, 2012). Despite these challenges, DI remains a powerful strategy to foster inclusion and communicative competence in Thai EFL education.

This study builds on existing research by exploring how DI can be adapted to Thai secondary schools, providing practical insights for more responsive and effective language instruction.

Objectives

1. To find the needs for differentiating content, process, and product in the English classroom.

2. To investigate the learning style preferences and communicative needs of Thai EFL secondary students.

Methodology

Setting

This study took place at a large public secondary school in Chonburi province, eastern Thailand, serving approximately 3,200 students across Grades 7–12. The school follows the Thai national curriculum and offers specialized academic tracks to meet diverse learning needs.

Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the implementation of differentiated instruction in Thai secondary EFL classrooms. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when the aim is to gain in-depth understanding from individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). Using purposive sampling, the study selected 30 Grade 9 male students (aged 14–15) from the English Program. This ensured a homogeneous group in terms of academic background and English language proficiency, excluding Regular Program students to maintain consistency in learning experience and ability.

Research Instruments

Learning Style Questionnaire

To assess students' learning styles and preferences prior to implementing differentiated instruction, this study employed a structured learning style questionnaire as the primary research instrument. The questionnaire aimed to identify individual learner needs in four main areas: language proficiency and familiarity with CEFR-related content; preferences regarding classroom activities, including physical movement, seating arrangements, and group versus individual work; homework preferences related to type, time management, and available support systems; and preferred assessment formats, such as multiple-choice tests, written tasks, presentations, and projects.

Initial validity testing, using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC), yielded a score of 0.67, indicating moderate to good alignment between item content and instructional objectives. Based on expert feedback, revisions were made to improve clarity, ensure content was developmentally appropriate, align tasks more closely with learning objectives, and simplify language to reduce the need for translation.

Following these refinements, the IOC scores across key validation criteria—including objective alignment, content appropriateness, activity design, and evaluation consistency—improved significantly, reaching full agreement among reviewers. These results confirmed that the instrument demonstrated strong content validity and was well-suited to support the differentiated instructional framework of the study.

Research Instruments

Data Collection and Analysis

To gain a comprehensive understanding of students' learning preferences and communicative needs, this study employed a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques. This methodological choice was justified by the study's objective to explore not only patterns in student preferences but also the deeper reasoning behind those choices—something that neither method could fully capture on its own. Interviews were conducted during the first week of the 2024 academic year. Each student was interviewed individually in a quiet and private setting to ensure confidentiality, minimize peer influence, and promote authentic responses. The semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into student responses while maintaining consistency across participants.

Quantitative data, such as frequency counts of preferred learning styles or assessment types, were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation to explore trends across different student groups. This helped identify broad patterns, such as the percentage of students who preferred visual over auditory learning styles or individual tasks over group work.

For the qualitative component, the interview transcripts were analyzed using content analysis, a systematic approach that involves coding the data into meaningful categories. Codes were first generated inductively from the data and then grouped into broader themes. This method enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns in students' responses that reflected underlying communicative and instructional needs. To increase transparency and rigor, examples of themes and corresponding codes are presented in the table 1 below:

Theme	Sample Code	Example Quotation
Preferred Learning Styles	Visual learner	"I understand better when I see pictures or diagrams, not just listen."
Instructional Preferences	Group activities vs. solo work	"I feel more comfortable working alone because I'm shy to speak in front of others."
Communicative Needs	Speaking confidence	"I want more speaking practice, but I'm afraid of making mistakes."
Assessment Preferences	Project-based assessment	"I like doing projects more than taking tests because I can show my creativity."

The use of qualitative interviews was essential in uncovering nuanced insights that would not have been evident through surveys alone. For example, while many students selected "group work" as a preference in the questionnaire, the interviews revealed that their choice was often driven by fear of public speaking rather than enjoyment of collaboration. Such depth of understanding is vital for designing effective differentiated instruction that not only accommodates student preferences but also addresses their underlying needs and anxieties.

In sum, the combination of quantitative data for pattern recognition and qualitative interviews for in-depth exploration provided a holistic view of the student learning experience in Thai EFL classrooms. This methodological approach aligns closely with the goals of differentiated instruction, which emphasizes personalized, responsive teaching grounded in students' real needs and preferences.

Findings

Research Question 1: What are the needs for differentiating content, process, and product in the English classroom?

Interviews revealed that Thai EFL students benefit from differentiation in content, process, and product, due to varying proficiency levels, learning styles, and cultural factors.

Content: Students preferred materials that matched their language level and personal interests. Easier texts, videos with subtitles, music, and pop culture themes helped improve engagement and confidence.

Process: Learners favored diverse activities—especially visual aids, games, and movement-based tasks. Preferences varied between group and individual work. Culturally, students appreciated gradual, low-pressure changes in teaching methods.

Product: Students valued choice in assessments. Many felt traditional tests were stressful and unrepresentative of their abilities. Creative options like videos, posters, and presentations helped them show understanding in more personal and meaningful ways.

Summary: Effective differentiated instruction should adapt content complexity, vary learning activities, and offer flexible assessments—while being sensitive to cultural and emotional needs of students.

Research Findings: What are the learning style preferences and communicative needs of Thai EFL secondary students?

Overview

To complement the qualitative findings on differentiated instruction implementation, a learning style and learning preferences interview was administered to identify specific student preferences across four key domains: language learning approaches, classroom activities, homework practices, and assessment methods. This quantitative data provided essential baseline information for designing effective differentiated instruction strategies as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Learning Style Preferences and Communicative Needs of Thai EFL Secondary Students

Domain	Preference/Need	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
CEFR Awareness	Universal awareness	16	100%
Preparation Strategies	Traditional methods (reading, reviewing, practice)	11	68.75%
	No systematic preparation	4	25%
Classroom Activities	Debates and speeches	8	50%
	Online games (Kahoot, Blooket)	3	18.75%
	Physical movement	3	18.75%
	Music integration	2	12.5%
Learning Environment	Prefer moving around classroom	12	75%
	Prefer remaining seated	4	25%
Work Preferences	Collaborative (partner/group work)	15	93.75%
	Individual study	1	6.25%
Homework Completion	Experience late submission	16	100%
Homework Preferences	Traditional worksheets/exercises	8	50%
	Online tasks	3	18.75%
	Presentations	2	12.5%
	General homework aversion	3	18.75%
Time Management	Complete immediately after the assignment	12	75%
	Defer to after-school/weekends	4	25%
Homework Support	Rely on peer assistance	12	75%
	Work independently	3	18.75%
	Use online resources	1	6.25%
Assessment Preferences	Project-based/presentations	11	68.75%
	Multiple-choice tests	3	18.75%
	Written examinations	2	12.5%

Key Findings and Implications

1. Learner Preferences and Communicative Needs

Students strongly preferred interactive, group-based learning that supports real-life communication. Most enjoyed activities like debates, games, and movement-based tasks, with 93.75% favoring group work. Quotes such as "When I work with friends, I feel less nervous" reflect this preference. Learning styles varied, but visual and kinesthetic methods were popular. Students wanted English lessons that focus on practical speaking skills rather than grammar drills. Homework preferences

were mixed (50% preferred worksheets, others liked presentations or online tasks), and most relied on peer support, revealing a need to build autonomy.

Implication: Instruction should be student-centered, offering choices, collaborative tasks, and varied modalities to meet diverse learning preferences.

2. Language Preparation and Assessment Practices

Though all students were familiar with CEFR, most (68.75%) prepared through memorization and test practice, not real communication. One student said, "I study for the test by memorizing words, but I still can't speak." In contrast, they preferred project-based assessments (68.75%) over traditional exams. Students felt more confident and engaged when allowed to show learning through creative formats.

Implication: Teachers should align test prep with communicative goals and use authentic, differentiated assessments like presentations and projects to reflect true abilities.

Instructional Implications:

Differentiated instruction in Thai EFL classrooms should emphasize communicative tasks, collaborative work, performance-based assessments, and multimodal content. Tailoring instruction to student preferences can foster greater engagement and develop essential real-world language skills.

Discussion

This study critically expands the current understanding of differentiated instruction (DI) in Thai secondary EFL classrooms by emphasizing students' strong preference for interactive, collaborative, and communicative learning, which remains under-implemented despite widespread theoretical support. The dominance of group work (93.75%) and movement-based activities (75%) not only aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Gardner's multiple intelligences, but also demonstrates the urgency of shifting Thai classrooms from teacher-centered models to learner-driven environments (Gheyssens et al., 2023).

Importantly, while students were highly aware of CEFR (100%), their reliance on rote learning and mock exams shows a persistent misalignment between curriculum goals and actual classroom practice—a challenge echoed in Lee et al. (2023). This gap reveals the novelty of the present study: it does not merely confirm existing preferences, but highlights how policy awareness does not translate into communicative competence without culturally responsive pedagogy.

Students' strong preference for performance-based assessments (68.75%) over multiple-choice exams supports Brookhart's (2024) call for assessments rooted in authentic tasks, particularly those aligned with CEFR and ACTFL descriptors. However, few Thai schools systematically adopt such assessments, making this study a practical call to redesign classroom evaluation tools in line with CLT principles.

Additionally, this research identifies a critical but often overlooked factor: homework management and learner autonomy. With all students reporting late submissions and dependence on peers, the findings call for differentiated homework with flexible formats and better time-support strategies. These areas are rarely explored in the Thai EFL context, providing a new lens on DI implementation.

Finally, the study emphasizes the need for teacher training to move beyond awareness of DI and into actual practice. While previous research (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023) shows many teachers support DI theoretically, classroom reality remains unchanged. This study contributes practical insights for

curriculum designers and policymakers, especially in fostering student-centered, culturally aligned, and communicative instruction across Thai EFL programs.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into Thai EFL secondary students' learning preferences and communicative needs, several limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on a specific cultural and educational context may limit generalizability to other EFL settings. Recent research emphasizes that cultural differences play significant roles in how educational innovations are perceived and implemented, suggesting that motivational strategies need to be culturally sensitive to be most effective.

Future research should examine long-term learning outcomes resulting from differentiated instruction implementation based on identified student preferences. Systematic reviews of cross-cultural communicative competence emphasize the need for strengthening students' critical thinking and communication abilities through innovative pedagogical approaches (Zhou et al., 2024). Additionally, investigation of teacher preparation needs and technology integration strategies would contribute to more effective implementation of culturally responsive differentiated instruction.

Conclusion

This study contributes significant evidence supporting the implementation of differentiated instruction approaches that honor Thai EFL secondary students' learning preferences while promoting communicative competence development. The findings demonstrate clear alignment between student preferences and contemporary educational theory, validating the need for collaborative, interactive, and culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. The research provides concrete guidance for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to implement effective differentiated instruction that addresses diverse learning needs while maintaining rigorous academic standards and authentic communicative competence development in EFL contexts.

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