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Attitudes of Greek French Language Teachers on Differentiated Teaching

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Abstract: Differentiation involves a series of interventions for the organisation of teaching and learning, which seek to adapt teaching to the abilities, performance, interests and particular aptitudes of pupils, in order to create the best possible conditions for personal development for each pupil, while ensuring a commonly accepted level of basic knowledge, skills and competences for all pupils. The present qualitative research, conducted between May and June 2023 in Thessaloniki area, presents the views of Greek teachers of French in Secondary and Primary Education on the role of differentiation in terms of teaching style, content and outcomes in the teaching of French as a foreign language in public schools.

Keywords: French language, didactic, differentiation of teaching, differentiation techniques.

Introduction

Differentiated instruction is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that starts from the position that instruction should start from where students are, rather than relying on a predetermined plan of action that ignores the student's readiness, interest and learning profile (Kelley, 2018; Tomlinson, 2003). Differentiated instruction should be perceived as a teaching method that treats students as biographies rather than copies of the same image (Koutselini, 2009). Differentiated teaching is proposed primarily for social reasons: it provides equal opportunities for education, without exclusion and discrimination. Also, knowledge acquired actively remains alive to be used in new situations (Stavrou & Koutselini, 2016). Finally, in the context of lifelong learning, students discover the need to learn how to learn. Differentiated teaching is also proposed for pedagogical reasons: the democratic school, through individual and collective learning processes, contributes to the democratization of society by constantly supporting the right of every student to develop in a balanced and harmonious way his or her inherent physical, mental, and spiritual potential and to transform it into individual abilities and skills, and to the highest possible degree (Schwab et al., 2021). The differentiation of teaching is also proposed for psychological reasons, as according to the contemporary concepts of Cognitive Psychology that found the principles of Epistemology, learning should be an exploratory process, in which the learner changes and reconstructs his/her pre-existing knowledge (Varsamidou, 2023). At the same time, students achieve and find school more interesting if instruction is delivered in a way that is responsive to their personal learning levels (Koutselini, 2008; 2009). Knowledge is produced through experience and the student constructs meanings himself/herself within a certain teaching context, which he/she even continuously reshapes as a result of reflective action (Koutselini & Persianis, 2000; Theofilidis, 2008). Through the strategies of differentiated instruction, students become motivated to learn and participate, develop individual skills and interests, take personal responsibility for outcomes, and enhance their capacity for collaboration and social learning (Shevchuk et al., 2021). The following research questions were asked in the context of the present qualitative research, which are the axes of the study: *a) How do teachers perceive the concept of differentiation in the teaching of French language? b) What differentiated teaching techniques have they used? c) To what extent do they choose to differentiate content, process, context and outcome in their daily teaching practice? d) To what extent do they feel satisfied with their training in differentiated teaching?* For reasons of length in this submission, we will limit ourselves to the first three research questions. Fifteen French language teachers teaching in public education (primary and secondary) in Thessaloniki area participated in the survey. The survey was conducted between May 20 and June 20, 2023, and a semi-structured interview was chosen as the research instrument. Regarding the demographic characteristics of the sample, 13 were female and 2 were male. 10 permanent French teachers and 5 contractual participated. Out of a total of 15 respondents, 9 are serving in primary and 6 in secondary education and in terms of years of service, 7 teachers have 10-15 years of teaching experience, 3 teachers have more than 20+ years of teaching experience and 5 teachers have 0-5 years of teaching experience.

Research Results

Regarding the first research question related to the way in which the French language teachers in the sample perceive the concept of differentiated instruction, it emerges that many of them define it, incorrectly, as the categorisation of students according to their abilities. A permanent secondary school teacher states: *"...differentiation in teaching means putting easy activities for students with a low level in the foreign language and more complex activities for students who can cope".* The same position is expressed by a deputy primary school teacher: *'...I choose very easy activities for students who make a fuss or do not participate in the lesson. For the others I suggest activities*

from the book or prepare worksheets. I think this is the right thing for everyone". This is clearly a position that is not confirmed in the literature. When implementing differentiated instruction, the teacher does not place students in groups based on their skills, but chooses flexible grouping that allows students to work with different peers with the same or different level of readiness or the same or different interests (Institute of Educational Policy, 2022). It also selects engaging learning activities that engage students and address the curriculum objectives based on students' learning readiness, interests, and learning preferences (Institute of Educational Policy, 2022). Of course, there are teachers who argue that differentiated instruction, especially in foreign language, is about flexibility of process and designing activities that are of interest to students and set common goals for the whole class. A permanent primary school teacher notes: *"...the training course on differentiated teaching that I attended last year was very important for me. I understood that differentiation is not about classifying pupils into good and bad, but in the careful planning and selection of activities that meet the needs and abilities of the pupils each time".* Literature supports the above view, as differentiated instruction focuses on students being aware of their potential and self-regulating their learning (Institute of Educational Policy, 2022). A study by Kelley (2018) showed that language teachers modify activities and strategies to suit their students' needs and create classes with open discussions, dialogue, and collaboration. Findings also showed that effective language teachers collaborate with colleagues to design differentiated instructional activities and use reflective practice to improve lessons. Due to the use of differentiated instruction in their lessons, language teachers reported that they have achieved student autonomy and an improved student perception of their lessons. Finally, the study showed that teachers need additional time to plan their lessons and learn more about differentiated instruction and need appropriate training (Kelley, 2018). Regarding the second research question, which relates to the differentiated teaching techniques chosen by the teachers in the sample, interesting conclusions emerge. Teachers' responses are shaped by whether they have been trained in differentiated teaching techniques. A permanent teacher in secondary education reports: *"...I do not know any specific techniques to differentiate teaching in the classroom. I work more by intuition. I divide the students into small groups, give them worksheets to complete, sometimes we use digital tools to do matching activities mainly for vocabulary. The students do not have a high level in the foreign language, and I try to make the lesson easier and more fun".* This is the most common misconception made about differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction techniques are not intended to make the lesson "easier" for the students, but to put them in a process of self-awareness and understanding of their capabilities (Rovai & Pfingsthorn, 2022). Lessons can be made more enjoyable and fun, but always in line with the teaching objectives set by the curriculum and involving all students and not just those who "do well". Despite the inequalities that exist within a classroom, studies on differentiated pedagogy have shown that it is possible to create one or more groups, where each pupil within the group can develop at his or her own pace, depending on his or her level, profile, or needs. Moreover, lessons based on authentic projects make it possible to stimulate motivation, maintain group cohesion and promote the development of autonomy of learning (Perevertkina & Zolotareva, 2021; Pouzergues & Zolotareva, 2022). Teachers who have attended training on differentiated teaching techniques mention techniques such as learning centers, cubing, RAFT, think-tac-toe, Frayer Model, think-pair-share. A contractual primary school teacher with a few years of teaching service, he emphasizes: *"...last year I attended the Ministry of Education's training on differentiated teaching techniques and how I can organize a graded foreign language course. One of the techniques I learned and liked very much was Learning Stations. In the middle of the year, just before the Christmas holidays, when students start to get tired and unmotivated I decided to create learning centers in the classroom. It went very well, and the students liked it. We were learning the vocabulary of colors in relation to different fruits. I created 5 stations: the matching station, the grammar station, the oral production station, the digital activity station, and the creation station. It took a lot of preparation on my part, but the result was amazing.*

Everyone participated enthusiastically". Learning Centers, which include a collection of materials or activities designed to teach, reinforce, or extend a particular idea or skill, can be used to differentiate instruction in terms of content (Theisen, 2002). In general, the following can be mentioned as characteristics of Learning Centers: a) Location: learning centers have a defined location or space in the classroom. This space may be a few desks next to the wall, a corner of the classroom, a few cushions etc.; b) the label: Each Learning Center should have a clear label or title that makes the focus and purpose clear to the students, c) the instructions: It is important that each Learning Center has clear instructions on tabs about what they need to complete and in how much time. In effect, these tabs outline the activities to be done in the Centre and the order in which they should be completed; d) resources: Learning Centers should have information materials and anything that students need (maps, pencils, cardboard, radios, microphones, computer, photographs, etc.) (Institute of Educational Policy, 2022). A similar conclusion about the importance of Learning Centers as a key technique in differentiated instruction is reached by a study by Denizci, (2022): students as they move between Learning Stations use facial expressions, movement, rhythm, eye direction. In this way they escape isolation due to the seating arrangement, the distance between them is reduced, they feel part of a large group, they cooperate and learn to accept each other. Therefore, improvement through the choice of differentiated teaching techniques is not only about language communication skills, but also about the parallel development of soft skills (cooperation, acceptance, team spirit). Concerning the third research question, which focuses on the frequency of differentiation in the daily teaching of French in terms of content, process, context or outcome, the opinions of the teachers in the sample do not show major differences. The frequency depends both on the grade and on the composition of the class (number of students, heterogeneity). Permanent secondary school teacher reports: *"...the foreign language subject is often considered secondary, with the result that pupils are not interested. I choose to motivate them through differentiation activities to gain their interest and at the same time make the lesson meaningful for me. Maybe in terms of content differentiation is more effective, but preparing specific content based on the objectives of the program is a process that requires a lot of time and effort on the part of the teacher, so I don't do it often, I prefer to follow the book"*. Contractual Primary Teacher focuses on process and context differentiation: *"...whenever I suggest something new that can be accompanied by a small change in the space, desks, chairs, drawings on the walls, or when I tell them to close their eyes to listen to something or narrate something, it always works positively. They like it even though I can't do it very often. There are colleagues who don't want disruption in the room when they come after me to do a lesson"*. Related research by Kanellopoulou and Darra (2022) showed that the characteristics of pedagogical differentiation that show the highest frequency of occurrence belong to four broad categories. These are: a. "processes", b. "context", c. "effective learning" and d. "assessment". The results of the above research showed that in primary education the category with the highest frequency is modification of the accompanying educational environment, followed by meeting the needs of students and modification of student-centered teaching and learning. In addition, the categories with the lowest frequency of occurrence include the ability to select and design materials and content for skill development and finally, the lowest is the effort for continuous assessment.

Conclusions

From the qualitative analysis of the teachers' responses to the research questions of the survey, it emerges that: a) there is confusion about the definition of differentiated teaching, and this is mainly due to the lack of relevant training. French language teachers who have understood the pedagogical dimension of differentiated teaching (objectives, content, activity design) successfully incorporate differentiation strategies, (Lescouarch, 2021), b) teachers choose to differentiate their lessons either intuitively or by using techniques learned in training programs. A similar study on Content and

Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) showed that the design of differentiation activities needs to be revised to meet the requirements of the school and the needs of the students (Pérez Cañado, 2023); c) on the frequency of integration of differentiated teaching activities, according to the teachers in the study this is occasionally the case for secondary teachers and more often for primary teachers. This is confirmed by a study by Pozas et al. (2020) according to which teachers occasionally implement differentiation practices, while differences are recorded between teachers working in secondary schools (they implement less such practices) and primary school teachers who are more positive and incorporate differentiation practices in their lessons very often. In general, the incorporation of differentiation techniques in everyday foreign language teaching should be a field of broad training accompanied by practical application, so that students benefit and develop autonomy and motivation to learn French.

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