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Differentiated Instruction and Portfolio Assessment as Motivational Tools for EFL Learners

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Abstract : Ongoing socio-cultural changes within contemporary classrooms make it essential to modify and revise existing teaching materials. In classes that include cultural minorities, learners' needs are brought to the forefront, and teaching objectives are adapted accordingly. However, such a demanding undertaking requires well-trained teaching staff and adequate guidance. The present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of differentiated instruction and alternative assessment in teaching English to linguistically and culturally diverse classes. Specifically, the research focuses on the effect of these approaches primarily on enhancing learners' motivation and, secondarily, on their overall language development. This action research examined the outcomes of two groups of diverse-population students attending the third grade of secondary school. The experimental group received differentiated instruction, while the control group followed a traditional classroom approach. To ensure reliable conclusions, multiple data collection tools were employed, providing both qualitative and quantitative information. These tools included a needs-analysis questionnaire, a pre-test and post-test, portfolio evaluation checklists, and semi-structured student interviews, which were subsequently interpreted and analyzed. As this is a small-scale study with a limited sample, the findings cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, they offer a clear picture of minority students' attitudes and preferences toward English, which can serve as a starting point for further research. The results revealed the positive effects of implementing hands-on, alternative tasks and holistic skill development on student participation and foreign language learning. More specifically, the young learners showed increased motivation and willingness to become actively involved in the learning process.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, Diverse population, Portfolios, Secondary students.

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INTRODUCTION

The growing cultural and linguistic diversity in educational systems worldwide has made it imperative to reimagine traditional teaching and assessment practices. Recent research has underscored the necessity of shifting from deficit-based to asset-based models, emphasizing the potential of culturally sustaining pedagogies and learner-centered frameworks to foster motivation and academic resilience among students from minority and

migrant backgrounds. Abbott and Lee (2024), for instance, found that portfolio-based language assessment, when implemented with a learning-oriented focus, can positively influence learners' self-regulated learning and emotional engagement. Furthermore, a study by López and Olivares (2024) demonstrated that targeted teacher empowerment programs significantly enhance educators' ability to design equitable curricula that respond to the diverse cultural and linguistic needs of their students. These insights serve as a crucial backdrop for the present study, which investigates the effectiveness of differentiated instruction and alternative assessment in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms.

Ongoing socio-demographic transformations entail serious upheavals in class compositions. Consequently, the adaptation of the school reality to the new needs is considered imperative. In educational contexts worldwide, apart from foreign cultures which enrich the student population, there are also regions in which numerous students originating from cultural minorities attend public schools. According to the Council of Europe (2006), they should be provided with opportunities which will encourage their participation in all educational levels. Their deficient school attendance is considered to be a major problem stemming from their living conditions, their customs, the challenge of the language, as well as the fear of failure (Chatzisavvidis, 2007, Nova-Kaltsouni, 2004, Ploumidi, 2016). Over the years, several attempts have been realized globally, aiming at minority education and the decrease of drop-out rates; yet many of these efforts have yielded limited success (Vasileiadou and Pavli-Korre, 2011; Ziomas, Bouzas, Spyropoulou, 2011).

Measures have also been taken for the education of remigrants and immigrants. The massive inflow of people of diverse cultural backgrounds led to the constitution of intercultural education which was an important step but proved to be inadequate in many instances (Trilianos, 2006). In the late 1990s, many educational systems introduced special reception classes which operate alongside the regular class and aim at offering further help to those students who have difficulty with the mainstream language (Damanakis, 2005). However, the remigrants' and immigrants' mother tongues seem to have been neglected by the formal educational policy (Nikolaou, 2008). Mainstream education often focuses on the development of the dominant language and culture, thereby dwarfing the existence of cultural and linguistic diversity (Karamitsopoulos, 2016).

It is evident that measures should be taken so that every student's needs are met and lessons become meaningful. Since the traditional teaching approaches, more often than not, fail to meet the needs of diverse student populations, the educational system should thus take a step forward to

embrace the students' diversity in all of its strands.

According to research, teaching to minorities demands the application of specific strategies. Research conducted by Alexiadou (2019) showed that when dealing with minority groups, the educational policies to be followed are not predetermined. They are sh aped and adapted by the interaction with the participants in such a way which will provide equal educational opportunities. Kirkey (2005) in her research concluded that differentiated instruction (DI) enriched the curriculum and, while focusing on the process rather than the product, it gave students opportunities and motivation to engage in the learning process. Apart from its motivational role, DI could contribute to the improvement of students' progress. In a research study conducted by McAdamis (2001), it is evident that the use of DI contributed to both students' enthusiasm and their test-score improvement.

Alternative forms of assessment could also play a motivating role regarding students' participation. Research conducted by Nassirdoost and Mall-Amiri (2015) showed that, although portfolios did not affect students' vocabulary progress, they did nevertheless attract their attention to portfolio preparation. Portfolios could also be used as a source of documentation of students' own progress. Tuksinvarajan and Todd (2009) support the importance of portfolios in students' self-monitoring their learning, as well as in the development of their metacognitive skills. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

1. RQ1: Can the use of alternative teaching methods enhance the motivation of EFL learners toward the teaching and learning process?
2. RQ2: To what degree does alternative assessment promote EFL learning within the examined classes?
3. RQ3: Will learners be capable of developing all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)?
4. RQ4: Is differentiated instruction more effective than traditional approaches in terms of student progress?

Literature Review

1. Differentiated Instruction

Recent meta-analytical and systematic review studies have confirmed the positive impact of Differentiated Instruction (DI) on various student cognitive abilities, including academic achievement and critical thinking skills across diverse educational settings (Ahearn, 2024). Furthermore, research in the EFL context continues to highlight that while teachers recognize the benefits of DI for student engagement, its full implementation in classrooms remains a challenge that requires targeted professional development

(Jufrianto et al., 2025). A scoping review by Ardenlid, Lundqvist, and Sund (2025) also systematically delineated 11 types of DI practices that teachers use to foster inclusive classrooms, including elements like shared goals, self-reflection, authentic content, and adjusted pace. These contemporary findings underscore the continued relevance and practical necessity of effectively implementing DI to address learner diversity.

DI views students individually, suggesting appropriate curriculum adaptations with respect to students' diversity (Hall, 2002). It is based on the principle that instructional approaches should be appropriately adapted according to students' individuality and diversity (Tomlinson, 2014). Therefore, its application in culturally diverse classes is highly recommended. Through this teaching approach, students are provided with a safe environment and fair opportunities to participate, and are also given alternatives according to their learning style (Tomlinson, 2014). Tomlinson (1999, p.43) points out that the three fundamental features of DI are "content, process and product".

A purposeful differentiation in content demands that instruction be "concept-focused" as well as "principle-driven" (Hall, 2002, p.2). Process may refer to strategies involving high-order thinking, as well as the elements of discovery and reasoning. Additionally, promotion of students' critical thinking, appropriate activity modification and flexible class management are also parts of the process (Hall, 2002; Heacox, 2012; Bailey & Williams-Black, 2008). Product is the way a learner demonstrates what knowledge has been acquired and performed over a period of time. A successful product challenges learners' intellect and encourages critical thinking (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005; Tomlinson, 2005). Affect regards learners' feelings and attitudes toward themselves, their work, and the class. Students' emotions toward learning are affected by factors like gender, learning style, socio-economic and cultural background, and interests (Chapman & King, 2003).

Later, scholars suggested the addition of the learning environment as an important element of DI. This concerns both the classroom arrangements, as well as the usual procedures followed during the lesson (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012).

Strategies used for DI include auditory material, visual aids, and kinesthetic tasks (Chapman & King, 2003). Group work and discovery learning through games are also instances of successful DI strategies. The creation of a safe and relaxing environment also encourages the positive perception of the learning process (Tomlinson, 1999; Wanja Njangi, 2014).

2. Alternative Assessment

Recent educational research has consistently advocated for a shift away from traditional high-stakes testing toward more formative, learner-centered assessment practices. A 2024 scoping review on assessment literacy and its development among language teachers confirmed that teachers often struggle to implement authentic, alternative assessment methods due to lack of training and institutional support. Furthermore, a study by Jovanovic and colleagues (2025) demonstrated that portfolio-based assessment, when combined with self- and peer-evaluation, significantly increased secondary school students' motivation and self-regulation in foreign language learning. These findings underscore the growing international consensus on the need to reform assessment policies in early language education, moving from summative, exam-based models to more inclusive, process-oriented approaches.

According to the latest national curriculum for teaching foreign languages at the primary education level, the traditional assessment method of progress tests or final exams for third-grade learners is no longer supported, as such methods are considered stressful and demotivating. Since the aim of foreign language learning for young learners is primarily communicative, assessment should focus on communicative competence, which entails an "understanding of sociocultural differences" (Savignon, 2017). Interaction and learner involvement are essential; therefore, self- and peer-assessment are regarded as fundamental. Moreover, providing feedback during the teaching process is necessary to help young students become autonomous and responsible for their own learning. Alternative approaches have emerged to bridge this gap and challenge traditional assessment, transforming the prevailing perception of what assessment entails (Reeves, 2000; Tsagari & West, 2004). Such assessment is characterized as "holistic and learner-oriented" (Vogt & Froehlich, 2018, p.148); consequently, lessons and assessments should be designed according to students' interests and needs.

3. Portfolios

According to Apple and Schimo (2004, p.54), portfolios are a "purposeful collection" of work produced by students—work that is conducted, selected, and reflected upon by the students themselves (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). This selection primarily aims to exhibit students' progress in relation to the learning objectives set (Vogt & Froehlich, 2018). Portfolios are broadly welcomed by students as they offer an alternative to tests and serve as a motivating source. Berrett (2005) discusses the multiple purposes a portfolio may serve depending on the context.

Authentic and original tasks included in portfolios trigger students' imagination and function in a motivating manner, as shown by Martinez-Lirola and Rubio (2009). Motivated students tend to engage in class activities, devote time to developing their metacognitive skills, and seek help when needed (Jones, 2009). The tasks should be short, incorporating visuals, music, and elements of play (Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011), and they should also aim at students' overall development (Cameron, 2015). When portfolios are used in the classroom, students are not confined by strict time limits, as portfolios constitute the core of autonomous learning. Tuksinvarajan and Todd (2009) note that portfolios encourage students to document their learning, observe and evaluate the strategies they use to acquire knowledge. Specially designed checklists can contribute to this process and facilitate self-monitoring.

METHODOLOGY

Population and Context

The study was conducted in the Toronto, Canada. The local population consists mainly of Canadian families, along with smaller numbers of remigrants from Aelaide (Australia), Kaliningrad immigrants (Russia), and a few native Canadians. The research involved third-grade secondary school students, including both boys and girls. Two classes were selected based on their homogeneity in terms of cultural background, age range, and language proficiency. All students had received two years of EFL instruction (in the first and second grades), focusing primarily on listening and speaking skills. Consequently, they were considered capable of acquiring new foreign language knowledge while also addressing previous learning gaps.

The experimental group (class G1) consisted of 18 students aged 8–11 (7 boys, 11 girls): 12 Russians, 2 Australia remigrants, 1 second-generation Albanian, and 3 Canadians. Attendance was irregular due to challenging living conditions. Many students came from impoverished families reliant on state benefits, often lacking basic school supplies. The school building was prefabricated and under-equipped; seating arrangements were varied (horseshoe, group, frontal) to sustain interest. The control group (class G2) comprised 19 students (8 boys, 11 girls): 15 Russians, 2 Australians, and 2 Albanian remigrants, with no native Canadian learners. Their attendance patterns and cultural diversity mirrored those of the experimental group.

Instrumentation

The present study employed several instruments for data collection. Needs analysis questionnaires were administered to the experimental group

to identify their attitudes toward English as a foreign language (EFL) as well as their preferences regarding instructional methods. Following a quasi-experimental design, pre-tests and post-tests were administered to both groups. These tests served two purposes: first, to determine the young learners' initial strengths and weaknesses, and second, to measure any progress achieved after the intervention. Portfolios were used exclusively with the experimental group as a tool to enhance motivation, facilitate self-monitoring of progress, and promote the development of metacognitive skills. At the end of the intervention, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the experimental group students, allowing the researchers to assess the extent of their motivation and to identify which factors contributed to it.

Needs Analysis Questionnaire

Language learning is not always a linear process; it involves gradual development and may yield unexpected outcomes (Long, 2005). Consequently, curriculum adaptations and the design of specialized materials become integral components of the teaching/learning process. This requires collecting relevant information about students' attitudes and needs, which can be achieved through needs analysis (NA) (Richards, 2001). Placing the student at the center of instruction and embracing learner-centeredness, educators and researchers employ various tools to identify needs, attitudes, and perceptions related to language learning (Nunan, 1988). Among these tools, the questionnaire offers numerous advantages. It is relatively easy to construct, the analysis of the collected data can be performed through straightforward steps, it can address multiple issues, and participants can complete it with ease (Richards, 2001).

The NA questionnaire designed for the present study was distributed to the experimental group. Due to the participants' age and proficiency level, the questionnaire consisted of only three parts, with most items being structured. Completion took approximately ten minutes. To verify the time requirement, the questionnaire was pilot-tested by two teachers/colleagues.

The NA questionnaire was developed based on three parameters: students' attitudes toward learning English, their needs, and their preferences (Tzotzou, 2014). Through this instrument, the curriculum content was specified and students' motivations were identified. Prior to completion, an introductory note explained the purpose of the survey (Taylor-Powell, 1998); this note was also read aloud and clarified by the researchers, as most students were not confident readers. The questionnaire was primarily written in English and then translated into their own languages to allow students to answer without

anxiety related to language proficiency. Furthermore, since the survey was intended for students with reading and writing difficulties, the items were presented in tables where students could tick or circle their preference (Tzotzou, 2014) or draw their answer.

The first part of the questionnaire asked students to provide biographical information (name, age, and class). The second part consisted of three sections. Section A invited students to indicate their attitudes toward English by ticking "yes" or "no" columns. Section B was divided into two subsections focusing on students' needs. First, students were given different aspects of EFL (vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, and others) and asked to circle those they found most difficult. Second, a list of teaching tools (stories, games, songs, films/videos, computers, painting, and others) was provided, and participants circled their preferences. Section C aimed to investigate students' learning preferences. Students were asked to write or draw their answer in a provided space, enabling the researchers to extract the necessary information for designing appropriate teaching materials (Tzotzou, 2014).

The Pre- and Post-Test

Pre-tests and post-tests serve to assess knowledge before and after an intervention, thereby indicating the degree of improvement achieved (Dimitrov & Rumrill, 2003). In classes with diverse student populations, pre-tests help identify problem areas and ineffective teaching methods. Students are not expected to perform well on a pre-test; its primary function is diagnostic, revealing which topics have been mastered and which still require further attention (Kuehn, 2019). Post-tests are typically identical to pre-tests, enabling teachers to measure the effectiveness of a particular method and to provide targeted support to students in need.

In the present educational context, pre-tests and post-tests were administered to diagnose any progress in skills resulting from the intervention. The students' proficiency level was low, and they had never been tested before; their competency was therefore considered pre-A1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2018). Consequently, it was deemed appropriate to design a test based on the pre-A1 Starters framework. The test comprised three sections.

The first section assessed listening skills. Part 1 was a multiple-choice task in which students listened to the teacher reading short, simple dialogues and then circled the correct answer. In part 2, test-takers listened to a short description and colored a set of items.

The second section evaluated reading and writing skills. First, students

were shown pictures accompanied by a word; they had to examine each picture and read the word carefully. If the word matched the picture, students ticked a box; otherwise, they placed an X. Part 2 presented a series of pictures with scrambled letters next to them. Students were expected to unscramble the letters to form correct words.

The final section consisted of a speaking task. Students were shown a picture and asked simple questions about their age and the number of objects in the picture. All sections included brightly colored pictures to attract students' attention and encourage motivation (Shabiralyani et al., 2015).

Several measures were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the tests. After constructing the test, ten experts examined its content and face validity. Specifically, eight teachers with more than eight years of EFL teaching experience, along with two university lecturers specializing in assessment and testing, reviewed the tests and made appropriate modifications and suggestions regarding relevance and clarity. Due to the specific cultural background and the linguistic and educational level of the groups under study, pilot testing on similar groups was not feasible. The reliability of the pre-test and post-test was calculated using Cronbach's alpha formula, yielding values of 0.796 and 0.77, respectively.

Portfolios

The updated curriculum endorses alternative assessment methods as more appropriate for young learners. Such methods also serve as valuable tools for conducting stress-free evaluation of students' competence and development. In the present study, the use of portfolios was considered ideal for motivating Romani students to develop a more positive attitude toward learning (Axton, 2012). As Ryan and Deci (2000) argue, intrinsic motivation arises from appropriate conditions: students need not experience failure, but rather take responsibility for their own work, including its selection and organization. This was precisely the case for the experimental group in this research.

Prior to this study, the students had never been assessed in the foreign language. Moreover, their class attendance frequency was low due to a lack of motivation. The portfolio implementation lasted approximately two months, covering the first school trimester. The procedure followed the steps outlined by Kemp and Toperoff (1998), which are detailed below.

1. *Identifying teaching goals*: The primary objective of portfolio application was to encourage motivation. However, linguistic competence was not neglected. Skills development was also promoted through the classroom tasks.

2. *Specifying the format:* Each student received a personal folder decorated according to their own taste. As Georgousis (1990, pp.30-36) notes, this fosters a "feeling of ownership" and, more broadly, engages students in the process.
3. *Introducing the portfolio in class:* Students were informed about the procedure to be followed and the purpose of the portfolio.
4. *Specifying the content*: In a subsequent session, students were presented with the contents to be included in their portfolios. The portfolio format was based on the European Language Portfolio (ELP), with several simplifications to suit the students' age, language level, and cognitive development. It was divided into the following sections:
   a. Contents page
   b. My Language Passport – containing simple personal information
   c. My Favourite Activity – where students attached materials from an enjoyable in-class activity, accompanied by a checklist for self-reflection.
5. *Presenting guidelines*: Emphasis was placed on the importance of organization and layout. Students were encouraged to take care of their work. Due to frequent incidents of theft, portfolios were kept securely after each session.
6. *Notifying other parties*: The school principal was informed of the new method and gave full approval. Additionally, a consent letter was sent to all parents to inform them about the portfolio implementation and to obtain their permission.
7. *Preparation period*: The application required considerable time. Although it was originally planned to dedicate one session per week, students often wanted to work on their portfolios more frequently—either to complete tasks or to organize their work. The teachers (who were also the researchers) acted as facilitators, providing help and feedback when needed.
8. *Assessment and feedback*: Portfolio entries, selected by the students themselves, were assessed using checklists. Through this process, students were given the opportunity to self-reflect and take responsibility for their own learning (McDonald, 2011). The checklists were written in their own languages because the students' English proficiency would have hindered completion of forms in English. Moreover, answers were presented primarily visually, as visuals are known to be motivating factors.

Throughout the process, students received encouragement and advice. The goal was to actively engage them in the portfolio application. At the end

of the designated period, students were awarded certificates to foster a much-needed sense of achievement.

Parent-teacher communication was conducted orally, as the majority of parents were illiterate and could not read written correspondence. Furthermore, oral communication proved to be a more direct and fruitful means of providing information.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted as part of the data collection process. Qualitative methods allowed the researchers to explore the purpose, context, and meaning of the study (Van Teijlingen, 2014). According to Edwards and Holland (2013), semi-structured interviews are flexible in that they do not require a fixed structure. The researchers used a set of open-ended questions, supplemented by additional prompts that served as facilitators (Piercy, 2004). These questions gave interviewees the freedom to discuss what they considered most important, following only general guidelines (Robson, 2005).

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to assess the attitudes that young learners developed toward English language learning after the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI), as well as to identify the strengths and weaknesses of its application. Laforest's (2009) guidelines were taken into account when designing this research method. The researchers identified the participants and determined the number of interviewees. The interviews were conducted individually to encourage shyer or less willing students to participate more eagerly and comfortably.

During the preparation phase, the respondents were informed about the procedure to be followed (Laforest, 2009). The school principal was notified and approved both the conduct and the recording of the interviews. The students were also fully informed in class and again just before the interviews; they showed great enthusiasm and willingness.

Due to the lack of available rooms, all interviews were held in the teachers' office whenever it was free. This meant that participants were engaged outside of regular English class time. Each interview lasted no more than five minutes. The questions were asked in their own languages to avoid intimidating the students and because the interviewees' English proficiency would not have allowed a productive discussion (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

Procedure

The present study was conducted from May 2023 to January 2025, spanning approximately 25 teaching hours. It followed a quasi-experimental design, employing pre-tests and post-tests for two groups of students: an experimental group and a control group. Two third-grade secondary school classes participated. Both groups were administered a pre-test before the intervention and a post-test afterwards, with the tests designed to match the students' age, language proficiency, and cognitive level.

The experimental group additionally completed a needs analysis (NA) questionnaire, which allowed the researchers to identify the students' needs and interests and to develop appropriate teaching and learning materials. In contrast, the control group received instruction based on the traditional teaching methods outlined in the coursebook. The lessons for the experimental group were designed according to the principles of differentiated instruction (DI). Portfolio assessment was also implemented as a means of motivating the students.

Following the intervention, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the young learners in the experimental group as the final step of the study.

Instructing the Control Group

The control group was taught primarily using a standard coursebook that is distributed free of charge to secondary school students. Instruction followed a traditional, uniform approach with no differentiation; that is, a "one-size-fits-all" model was applied. The alphabet was introduced through pictures accompanied by rhyming songs. Amusing, familiar comic-strip stories were used to present new vocabulary to young learners, and reading instruction was integrated with listening to audio materials. A phonics-based approach helped students become familiar with the Latin alphabet (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990). Oracy and literacy skills were developed through engaging activities such as songs, crafts, and dramatizations. All students were encouraged to participate, and additional support was often necessary.

Regarding assessment, students were not given any formal tests aside from the pre-test and post-test. Their performance was evaluated based on overall classroom performance, particularly participation and effort. This decision was made because the young learners were not accustomed to testing. Furthermore, their challenging backgrounds, combined with irregular attendance, hindered learning and resulted in low performance. Consequently, failure on a test would likely lead to a loss of motivation and reduced participation.

Experimental Group Instruction

The lessons for the experimental group were designed based on the needs analysis (NA) questionnaire completed by the third-grade students. Therefore, an effort was made to reflect the students' interests, and the lessons aimed for maximum participation. The lessons followed the guidelines of the national curriculum and were aligned with the objectives set by the textbook. Since the primary goal was motivation, the tasks adhered to the principles of differentiated instruction (DI) and incorporated elements of play and sensory-motor development (Cameron, 2015). In addition, task-based learning (TBL) was applied, as the core of this approach is the learner, who is encouraged to view language as a tool rather than an end goal (Task Based Learning, 2009). Tasks transform classes into enjoyable and interesting experiences while allowing students to use their language skills at their current level (ibid.).

The English alphabet was taught through group work and craft activities, which foster student motivation and positively influence discipline (Case, 2012). Songs and kinesthetic activities were also promoted as central components of the process. Puppetry was included as a means of communication and motivation, regardless of students' age, language level, or cultural background (Peck, 2005). Additionally, puppetry encouraged and promoted the development of imagination and creativity (Marshall, 2013).

The pedagogical value of board games and computer games was taken into account to create stress-free learning conditions, thereby contributing to better vocabulary acquisition (Mehregan, 2014; Vasileiadou & Zafiri, 2017).

Finally, dramatization was employed to trigger motivation and achieve participation. The use of drama in the EFL classroom offers multiple benefits (Boudreault, 2010): students develop a sense of confidence, perform better, and encounter new vocabulary in fully contextualized and therefore more meaningful ways (ibid.).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings were derived from multiple data sources, including the needs analysis (NA) questionnaires, pre-tests and post-tests, portfolios, and semi-structured interviews. This combination of instruments ensured the triangulation of the research and supported the validity of the study (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011).

1. Results of the Needs Analysis Questionnaire

The quantitative data collected from the NA questionnaire were organized into three sections, corresponding to the three parts of the instrument. Ten students from the experimental group participated in this phase. Although a total of 18 students were initially enrolled in the group, there was a high rate of attrition (i.e., reduced attendance). This phenomenon was also observed in a study by Kazanzi and Zafiri (2019), which involved Romani students, albeit from an older age group.

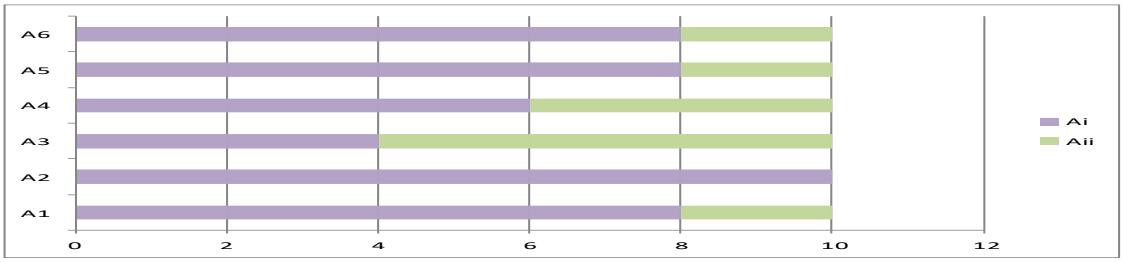


Figure 1. Students' attitudes towards EFL.

Part A: As illustrated in Figure 1, 80% of the students reported that they liked English. Overall, the participants expressed a preference for using their first language (L1) in class. Regarding the perceived difficulty of the target language, the results revealed a split: half of the respondents indicated that they found learning English difficult, while the other half did not. Furthermore, the vast majority of the participants stated that they remembered what they had learned in previous years, and most believed that English would prove useful to them in the future.

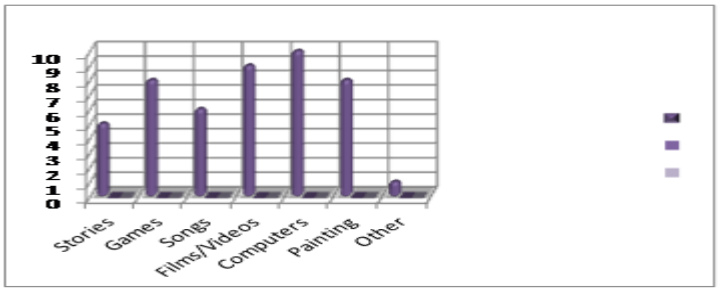


Figure 2. Students' preferences according to the NA questionnaire.

2. Pre- and Post-Test Results

Part B: Figure 2 shows that the young learners perceived reading, writing, and listening skills as equally challenging. Acquiring new vocabulary was considered less difficult, while two students commented that none of the EFL areas were difficult for them. Regarding preferences for learning English, alternative methods were the most popular (Figure 2). Learning through

stories was not as popular as learning through technology, which was enthusiastically received. Games, songs, videos, and painting were also selected, with painting being the most preferred. It is worth noting that two students also identified writing as a preferred way of learning the foreign language.

Part C: The final section of the questionnaire asked participants to comment—either in writing or through drawings—on what they enjoyed most about learning English. This open-ended question was designed to allow students to express their opinions freely on the topic. Many students drew colorful pictures that were unrelated to the question, while others commented that they enjoyed painting with friends.

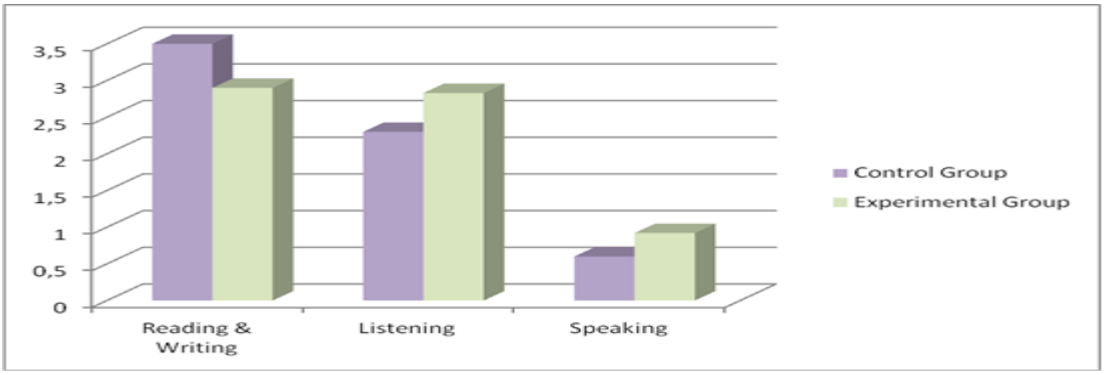


Figure 3. Pre-Test Results.

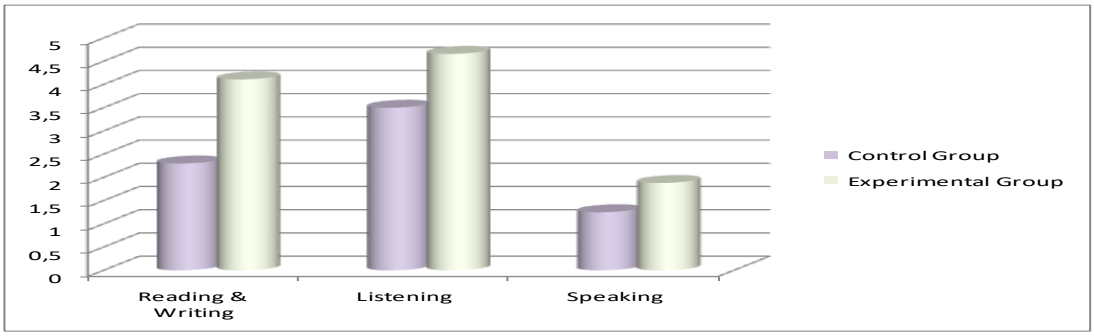


Figure 4. Post-Test Results.

Figures 3 and 4 present the pre-test and post-test results for the control and experimental groups. An apparent improvement can be observed in the post-test scores, particularly for the experimental group. However, statistical analysis indicated that this progress was not statistically significant. The data were analyzed using SPSS 26 software, employing an independent-samples t-test to compare the mean scores of the two groups on the pre-test and post-test.

Table 1. Mean Score, Standard Deviation and Independent Samples T-Test Results of the Pre-Test.

Group	M	SD	df	P (Sig. 2-tailed)
Control	5.50	4.598	14.884	.558
Experimental	7.00	5.701		

Table 2. Mean Score, Standard Deviation and Independent Samples T-Test Results of the Post-Test.

Group	M	SD	df	P (Sig. 2-tailed)
Control	7.13	5.222	14.302	.167
Experimental	10.67	4.743		

Table 1 displays the overall mean pre-test scores for both groups, along with the results of the independent-samples t-test. Table 2 presents the overall mean post-test scores and the corresponding t-test findings. Both groups showed higher mean scores on the post-test than on the pre-test. Nevertheless, the t-test results indicated no significant difference in skill development between the two groups. The p-value for the pre-test was .558 ($p > .05$), and the p-value for the post-test was .167 ($p > .05$). Although the latter p-value is noticeably lower than the former, the difference is not sufficient to reject the null hypothesis. Consequently, the results suggest that the intervention did not have a significant impact on the experimental group's skill development.

3. Results of the Semi-Structured Interviews

The final phase of the research consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with ten students from the experimental group. The interviews were carried out in their own languages due to the students' limited English proficiency and for motivational reasons. According to Alshenqeeti (2014), data obtained from semi-structured interviews cannot be analyzed using any single established method. Creswell (2014) suggests that such analysis can be conducted by coding the questions axially; more specifically, interviewees' experiences can be categorized and presented according to their importance and similarity. In the present study, the interviews were transcribed, categorized, and examined. The results were coded into three distinct axes: personal information, attitudes toward the target language, and perceptions regarding students' skills and the usefulness of the target language in real-life situations.

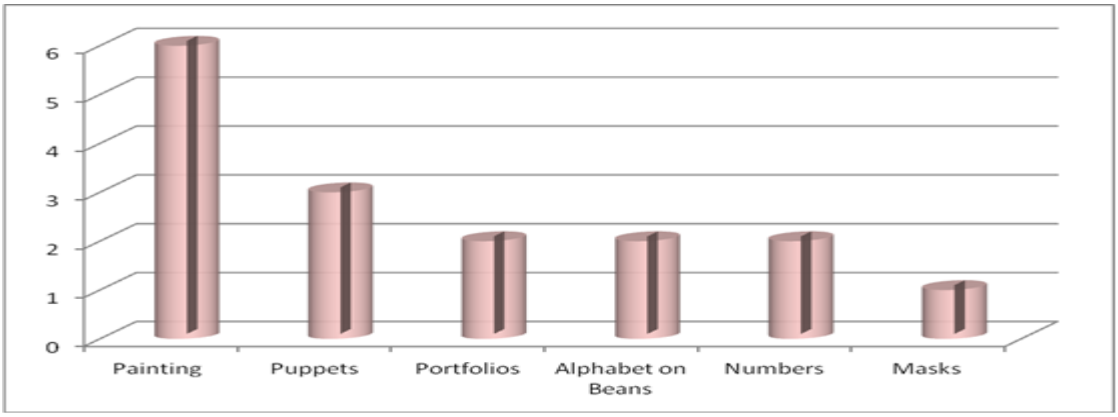


Figure 5. Preferences of the Experimental Group According to the Semi-Structured Interview.

In the first axis, participants were asked general questions about personal information (Laforest, 2009). Students responded to questions regarding their gender and age using single-word answers. According to the responses, 60% of the participants were female, and their average age was eight and a half years.

Regarding the second axis (Figure 5), all students reported that they enjoyed learning English. Most participants liked the opportunity to draw and paint while learning, while others preferred activities such as puppetry. Notably, 20% of the interviewees identified portfolios as their favorite part of the lesson. This finding suggests that portfolios may have achieved their intended purpose, namely, motivation.

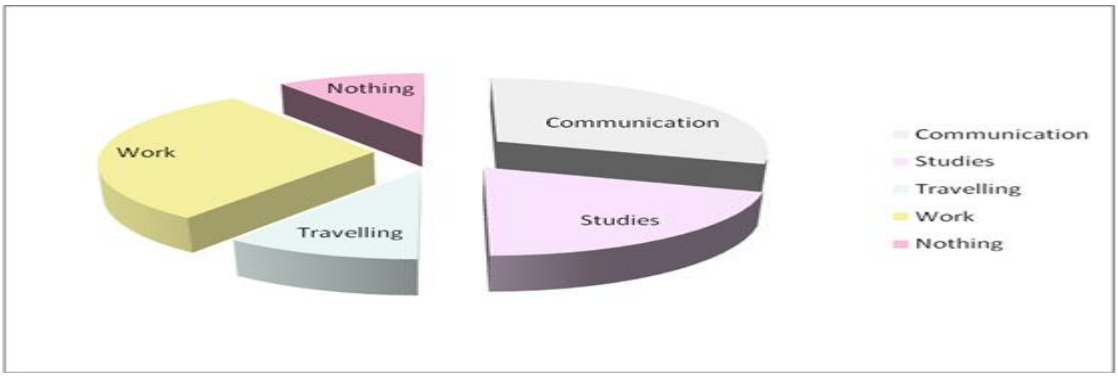


Figure 6. Students' Perceptions About the Future Use of the English Language According to the Semi-Structured Interview

In the final axis, the majority of students rated their writing performance in English as excellent, while 70% reported that their reading performance was low. Moreover, most students (70%) stated that they use English outside of school, especially when listening to music and browsing

the Internet. Romani students also responded positively (80%) regarding the future usefulness of the target language, particularly in relation to their future jobs, studies, and communication with foreigners (Figure 6).

4.4 Portfolio Application Results

The implementation of portfolios in the classroom provided the researchers with qualitative data. At the end of the research period, students were given a checklist to evaluate their own portfolios. The design and content of the checklist were adapted from Kemp and Toperoff (1998). All students reported that they had included everything required in their portfolios. Seventy percent answered that they had kept their folders organized. Overall, participants regarded portfolios as motivating tools for learning, with 90% stating that they were encouraged to engage in the learning process through the use of portfolios.

The second part of the checklist consisted of two open-ended questions. Students were asked to comment on which parts of the portfolio they liked and to offer suggestions for improvement. The majority of participants did not provide any answer. Among the few responses given, the most common was that the best part of the portfolios was the students' paintings. Regarding further suggestions, students stated that they would like to include more pages in their folders, indicating that this assessment tool encouraged them to participate in the learning process by taking control of the material and the organization of their work.

Discussion

The present study suggests that the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) and portfolio assessment can positively influence the motivation of culturally diverse students, particularly Romani learners. When this unique cultural group is provided with appropriate stimuli and motivation to participate, the outcomes are encouraging. Considering the research findings, the experimental group demonstrated greater interest in EFL lessons and attended classes more regularly than the control group. This leads to the conclusion that learners in the experimental group were offered stronger incentives for attendance and more opportunities to participate, along with a stress-free classroom environment (Sougari & Sifakis, 2007).

In the current study, the teacher-researchers used a needs analysis (NA) questionnaire as a starting point to design a series of tasks involving crafts, puppetry, board games, and drama. The young learners welcomed these novel methods with enthusiasm, and despite the challenges encountered, the findings indicated progress. More specifically, the questionnaire results showed that vocabulary acquisition was perceived as

the least challenging area, while reading, writing, and listening were considered difficult. In a study by Tzotzou (2014), which examined fifth-grade students' motivation, preferences, and needs through NA questionnaires, it was found that secondary school students ranked listening as their least favourite skill and reported no difficulties with reading, writing, or vocabulary. In the present study, however, the participant population was markedly different from that of Tzotzou's study, and the findings diverged accordingly: students lacked confidence across all skills. Regarding preferences, the present study found that the use of new technologies was the most preferred method. Tzotzou (2014) also observed a similar tendency toward new technologies and games, while stories were also a popular choice. In the final part of the questionnaire, students expressed their favourite aspects of EFL through drawings. The resulting pictures were colourful but sometimes irrelevant to the question. Yaman (2018) conducted a similar study on the perception of English as a foreign language through drawings among secondary school students in Turkey. His findings showed that secondary students perceived English as associated with objects, and consequently they most often drew objects representing the vocabulary they had learned. In the current research, although Part C of the questionnaire also aimed to identify general attitudes toward EFL, many students depicted objects. This may be because the students in question had not yet connected English language learning with vocabulary acquisition but rather with situations and experiences.

Regarding the pre-test and post-test results, it should be emphasized that skills development was not the primary focus of the present study. Nevertheless, observing potential changes in student progress proved useful. Specifically, although both groups showed similar competency on the pre-test, the post-test revealed an improvement in the experimental group's skills. However, statistical analysis showed that the difference between the pre-test and post-test was not statistically significant; thus, the intervention did not radically affect the experimental group's skills. The duration of the research period—only twenty-five teaching hours—may have influenced these results. The post-test findings do not align with those of some researchers who have investigated Romani students' motivation and DI techniques. After implementing DI, Kalogeri (2016) observed that the experimental group showed remarkable progress on the test administered. However, the test used by Kalogeri differed from the pre-test and post-test of the present study. Koraki (2017) reported significant improvement in Romani students' motivation following DI implementation and the provision of original, challenging experiences.

Regarding portfolio application, young students developed a sense of ownership and did not experience the fear of failure typically associated with traditional forms of assessment (Georgousis, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Student autonomy was also promoted, as each learner was in control of their own work—a factor that plays a significant role in building trust. In a study on the application of an English Language Portfolio (ELP) to young English learners, Perclova (2006) reported positive attitudes toward alternative assessment methods. Specifically, the majority of participants evaluated the ELP positively and described it as interesting. Notably, portfolios were particularly popular among secondary school students compared to lower-secondary students. Barabouti (2012) reported on portfolio application among secondary school EFL students and suggested that students considered good organization and clear presentation as the most important features of their portfolios. These findings reinforce the results of the present study, indicating widespread acceptance of portfolios by young learners.

Bobic (2018), who conducted semi-structured interviews with young Romani learners in Croatia, reported that the students considered English lessons useful, particularly for communication and socialization. This aligns with the findings of the semi-structured interviews in the present study: after the implementation of DI, students developed a more positive attitude toward the lessons, characterized them as more amusing and fun, and became motivated to participate. Similar results were observed in a study by Karadag and Yasar (2010) involving young Turkish learners taught through DI.

Despite the positive results emerging from this study, an analysis of its limitations is essential. This was a small-scale action research study conducted on a limited sample. According to Dörnyei (2007), the findings of action research cannot be generalized, which affects external validity. In addition, validity is also impacted by the instability of the research population. Owing to the students' cultural background, there was considerable attrition; the number of students was never constant, with some attending very infrequently and falling behind their peers. Nevertheless, certain adaptations were made to enable all learners to participate.

Another limitation was the lack of equipment and materials. The school could not provide all the necessary resources. Furthermore, due to the low financial status of the students' families, providing materials was difficult. In order to conduct the research properly, the researchers had to bear both the effort of finding appropriate materials and the cost of those needed for the lessons (e.g., folders, markers, materials for puppetry).

The positive effects of DI application in diverse classrooms warrant further research in the field of EFL. Additional research is also recommended

regarding Romani EFL students' skills development, as the intervention in the present study did not prove sufficient to produce significant gains. Young students from neglected and marginalized social groups need stimuli and new ideas; to make the teaching process meaningful, the educational community must provide them with fair opportunities and flexible lessons (Raines et al., 2016). It is necessary for stakeholders to approach this challenge with fresh thinking.

Finally, it is worth noting that teaching classes from culturally diverse backgrounds can be demanding and tedious; it requires special handling and an open mind. Stakeholders should provide special training to teachers who undertake the education of minority groups such as the Romani, so that they can apply the most appropriate instructional methods, approaches, and techniques. According to a case study by Comfort (2016), Romani learners are difficult to approach; they have suffered racial discrimination, and therefore teaching staff should approach them with positivity and understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study constitutes action research in which differentiated instruction was applied to diverse third-grade secondary school students. To examine the effectiveness of the approach, the results of two groups (experimental and control) were compared in terms of observed progress. The qualitative and quantitative data collected led to the conclusion that differentiated instruction benefited the students, as they displayed greater interest in EFL lessons and appeared more motivated than their peers in traditional classes. However, these findings pertain to the specific sample and should not be generalized, as this was a small-scale study. Moreover, student attendance was notably irregular due to challenges associated with the participants' cultural background.

Despite the limitations arising from the students' cultural identity, attendance fluctuations, and lack of adequate equipment, the research experience proved fruitful, and the positive outcomes made the effort rewarding. The difficulties encountered provided a constructive challenge that will be taken into consideration for future improvements.

Further, longer-term research could explore alternative ways to engage less-privileged students and may offer opportunities to modify prevailing perceptions of cultural minorities. Finally, future studies could also focus on the development of young Romani students' language skills.

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