



Effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction in Teaching *The Merchant of Venice*: An Action Research with Grade 12 Students

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Abstract

Teachers in Bhutanese schools need to be prepared with various teaching skills to cater to students with different learning styles while delivering lessons. This action research evaluated the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in teaching Shakespeare's 16th-century play, *The Merchant of Venice*, to grade 12 students at Nangkor Central School. The study investigated how differentiated teaching strategies impacted students' learning outcomes compared to traditional teaching methods. Using a quantitative approach, two groups of 30 students were formed: a control group that received conventional teaching and an experimental group that experienced differentiated instruction over four weeks. Pre- and post-tests were administered to measure improvements in understanding and performance in *The Merchant of Venice*. Results indicated that while both groups showed improvement, the controlled group achieved significantly higher mean scores compared to the experimental group. The findings suggested that conventional teaching methods may be more effective in certain contexts, highlighting the need for further exploration into the long-term effects of differentiated instruction.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, Merchant of Venice, pre-test, post-test, controlled group, experimental group

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Introduction

Teachers need to be well equipped with a variety of instructional strategies to address the diverse abilities and learning styles of students in the classroom. When students are unable to understand a lesson through one instructional approach, teachers must adopt alternative and more effective methods. At Nangkor Central School, students experienced significant challenges in understanding the language used in *The Merchant of Venice* (MOV). Without teachers rephrasing the text into simpler language, many students struggled to comprehend the characters' dialogue, which contributed to poor performance in English II.

Compared to English I, the mean score in English II has consistently been lower. In 2021, the mean mark for English I was 69.74, while English II recorded a lower mean of 65.15. Although Nangkor Central School is regarded as one of the better-performing schools in the country, students' performance in English fell below expectations. Furthermore, the overall English mean score declined from 66.90 in 2022 to 64.75 in 2023 (Council for School Examination and Assessment, 2023), raising concerns among English teachers and school leaders.

During professional discussions on the possible causes of the low performance in English II, subject teachers agreed that one major contributing factor could be students' low scores in MOV. Teaching the play was also challenging for teachers, particularly due to limited access to simplified or adapted versions of the text. Therefore, identifying effective teaching strategies became necessary to improve both comprehension and academic performance.

To address this issue, an action research study comparing conventional teaching methods with differentiated instruction was undertaken. With the advancement of technology and globalisation, teachers are increasingly expected to integrate digital tools such as online videos and PowerPoint presentations into their lessons. Nawaz (2023) emphasised that educators must remain responsive to changing instructional practices. Similarly, Tomlinson (2001) asserted that students learn in varied ways—some by listening, others by doing, some independently, and others collaboratively—highlighting the need for flexible teaching approaches.

With this understanding, the present study explored the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in teaching MOV to Grade 12 students at Nangkor Central School.

Objectives

The study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in teaching *The Merchant of Venice* to Grade 12 students.
2. To compare differentiated instruction with the conventional lecture method in improving students' comprehension and academic performance.

Reconnaissance

Situational Analysis

Nangkor Central School is a reputable boarding school located in the semi-urban area of Pemagatshel district, Bhutan. Currently, it serves 461 students and is staffed by 32 teachers. The school has earned recognition for academic excellence, attracting students from surrounding communities and other regions of the country. Committed to its vision of becoming a pinnacle of learning in eastern Bhutan, the school strives to provide quality academic and holistic education.

Most students come from modest family backgrounds, and many parents have limited formal education, which restricts their ability to provide academic support at home. Despite these challenges, the school maintains high educational standards. The institution is also equipped with modern infrastructure, including well-ventilated classrooms, projectors, whiteboards, and ceiling fans, which support interactive and multimedia-based teaching approaches.

English proficiency is essential for Bhutanese learners, as it is the primary medium of instruction and an international language. Students are expected not only to perform well academically but also to communicate fluently. However, analysis of school performance data indicated a decline in English mean scores from 66.90 to 64.75 between 2022 and 2023 (Council for School Examination and Assessment, 2023). It was also observed that many students struggled to express their ideas during English classes and faced difficulty answering essay-type questions.

Further analysis revealed that English II scores were consistently lower than English I scores. Teachers believed this was largely due to students' weak performance in the drama component, which carries 25 marks in the Bhutan Higher Secondary Education Certificate (BHSEC) examination. MOV is considered one of the most challenging texts because it is written in Early Modern English. Without modern translations or effective instructional strategies, students find it difficult to understand the dialogue and themes. If teachers do not adopt varied teaching approaches, students may continue to face difficulties, which could negatively affect not only English performance but also learning in other subjects taught in English.

Therefore, it became essential for the teacher-researcher to conduct action research on teaching strategies, specifically focusing on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in teaching the play to Grade 12 students.

Research Gap

Based on the literature reviews conducted on relevant literature on English language learning, student engagement, and pedagogical approaches, it provided a foundation for the current study by emphasising on the importance of teachers' understanding of students' learning profiles and delivering lessons in ways that best support their learning styles. For instance, simply adjusting the quantity of an assignment would be less effective than adjusting the nature of the assignment to match student needs. Struggling learners sometimes become more successful learners when their way of learning matches the teacher's design (Tomlinson, 2001). However, few studies have

investigated the effectiveness of differentiated instruction through action research with high school students, and none have focused specifically on Bhutanese students at Nangkor Central School. Therefore, the present action research examined the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in teaching English Drama (MOV) to grade 12 students. The research process and the output would also guide the teacher researcher to reflect on individual practices, leading to adoption of the best possible teaching approaches to strengthen students' understanding and academic performance. The research findings and experience could also be shared with other language teachers locally and in broader educational forums.

Research Gap

The reviewed literature on English language learning, student engagement, and pedagogical approaches emphasises the importance of understanding learners' profiles and adapting instruction accordingly. For example, Tomlinson (2001) highlighted that modifying the nature of tasks to match student needs is more effective than merely adjusting workload. Struggling learners often achieve greater success when teaching methods align with their learning preferences.

However, limited research has investigated the effectiveness of differentiated instruction through action research at the high school level, and no studies have specifically examined its impact among Bhutanese students, particularly at Nangkor Central School. Therefore, the present study sought to address this gap by examining the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in teaching English drama (MOV) to Grade 12 students. The findings are expected to support reflective teaching practices and provide insights that may benefit other English teachers within similar educational contexts.

Research Question:

How effective is differentiated instruction compared to the conventional teaching method in improving Grade 12 students' comprehension and learning of *The Merchant of Venice*?

Researcher's Competence

The researcher has 15 years of teaching experience and holds a Bachelor of Arts (BA) from MCM DAV College, Chandigarh, India, with a major in Psychology. The researcher pursued a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) from Samtse College of Education, with an elective in Youth and Career Education and English, and completed a Master's in Arts (MA) from Yonphula Centenary College. As an English teacher, the researcher has applied her knowledge in practical settings, fostering language proficiency. The researcher's action research on Teaching Phonetics (2023) was published in Pema Gatshel Dzongkhag Research Compendium.

Participants' Competence

The participants in this action research are students from grade 12 at Nangkor Central School. Under the national curriculum, English is used as the medium of instruction across all subjects. Although students possess basic skills in reading, writing, and speaking English, they face difficulties in the critical analysis of literary texts. One of the main issues observed is that students struggle to comprehend Shakespear's play. The groups chosen as samples were relevant for the research, as the students were at a critical stage of preparing for the BHSEC examinations, where MOV constitutes one of the sections in English II

Critical Friend

Wang Norbu has 15 years of teaching experience. He holds a Bachelor's degree in English and History from Paro College of Education and a Master's degree in School Health Science from Mahidol University in Thailand. His research has been published in the International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health, focusing on the prevalence of obesity and its contributing factors among adolescents in secondary schools in Pema Gatshel Dzongkhag. He possesses sound knowledge in action research and statistical analysis. Therefore, he is well-equipped to be a critical friend to guide the researcher.

Literature Review

This section reviews relevant literature on differentiated instruction, its importance in teaching the Merchant of Venice (MOV).

Definition of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated Instruction (DI) was conceptualised by Carol Ann Tomlinson, a professor at the University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development. According to Tomlinson (2002), DI is described as a proactive response to learners' needs, guided by key principles such as respectful tasks, flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, and instructional adjustment. She emphasises that teachers can differentiate content, process, product, and the learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001). Similarly, Hall (2002) describes DI as a systematic process through which instruction is modified to accommodate learners' differences. Smale-Jacobse et al. (2019) further conceptualise DI as a pedagogical–didactical approach that provides teachers with a framework for addressing students' diverse learning needs. Echoing these perspectives, DI in this study is defined as a learner-centred instructional approach in which teachers intentionally adapt teaching strategies, learning activities, and assessment practices to respond to students' varying readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles in order to maximise engagement and learning outcomes.

Importance of Differentiated Instruction in Teaching

Innovation in education has been the concern of all stakeholders, including policy makers, researchers, school administrators, teachers, parents, and the students. One form of the innovations in education is the effort to develop instructional strategies that cater to diverse learners, called differentiated instruction (Halim et al., 2022). A large number of teachers are adopting one-size-fits-all teaching instruction for all students. However, the diversity of student characteristics necessitates teaching strategies that can meet the needs of mixed-ability classrooms (Satyarini, 2022). DI needs to be developed and applied since it provides opportunities for learners to give their best based on their interests, abilities, and learning styles. They could achieve this by using different methods, such as observation, clinical interview, examination of children's work, interactive strategies in the classroom, group division, individual evaluation of the child, as well as discussions with their families (Ismaji & Morina, 2018).

Differentiated instructions have been recommended for classrooms with students of different readiness, learning profiles, and backgrounds in English classrooms (Mirawati et al., 2022). Some students learn best with their ears, some with their eyes, some with touch or movement, and some must interact with friends in order to learn (Tomlinson, 2001). It is important for all teachers, especially English language teachers, to implement DI during the learning and teaching process to maximise each student's learning potential (Satyarini, 2022).

Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction in the Classroom

Differentiated learning design, implementation, and assessment are time-consuming, especially in large classes. Further, differentiated support suitable to students' unique characteristics may also induce the prejudice that the teacher is partial. Understanding the principles of DI is important among students and their parents to avoid misconceptions of DI as partiality (Mirawati et al., 2022). Although DI tends to make teaching more satisfying and invigorating, learning strategies which are preferred by some students may not be effective for others (Tomlinson, 2001). Additionally, teachers do not have sufficient knowledge regarding differentiated instruction to be able to implement it successfully in the classroom. DI is not implemented efficiently because of instructors' professional unpreparedness, lack of adequate conditions that school offers, as well as, the large number of learners in a single class, especially in public schools (Ismaji & Morina, 2018). In addition, teachers encounter various limitations that prevent them from creating differentiated activities. A lack of time to complete the curriculum is perhaps one of the biggest limitations (Jager, 2017).

Strategies to Effectively Teach -*The Merchant of Venice*

A range of teaching strategies was used to teach MOV. Moodley (2013) tested several methods, which she referred to as Creative Pedagogy, while teaching MOV to high school students in

English Home Language Learning. One of her approaches was group dynamic sessions, which involved trust, focus and bonding activities aimed at building confidence. Role plays and memorising characters' dialogues were also used, with students engaging with the text primarily as a play, rather than as a philosophical text. Moodley also provided Shakespearean language translation handouts before teaching some scenes (Moodley, 2013).

Intervention on the Experimental Group

The following section describes how Differentiated Instruction (DI) was selected as the intervention to enhance students' learning of MOV. For Class 12 Science B, which was designated as the experimental group, the teacher implemented DI while teaching Acts 4 and 5 over a four-week period. To accommodate diverse learning styles and readiness levels, modern ICT tools were incorporated, including video lessons, PowerPoint presentations, and blended teaching approaches in which the teacher provided explanations and clarifications after students viewed the video content. This approach aimed to support varied learner needs while improving comprehension and engagement with the text. Tiered instruction was applied during the follow-up activities. Students were grouped into six levels based on their pre-test scores, with the teacher designing questions for each group in accordance with Bloom's Taxonomy. Higher-scoring students received application, analysis, and evaluation questions, while lower-scoring groups focused on memory, understanding, and comprehension skills. Each group member was assigned a number from one to six. As students discussed the questions within their groups, the teacher circulated to assist them in rephrasing questions and identifying key points for the answers. Once the groups completed their discussions, they formed new groups based on their assigned numbers; all number ONEs gathered together, followed by number TWOs, and so on. This structure allowed each new group to have an "expert" on each question. The experts shared their answers using Kagan's Round-Robin learning structure. Finally, students copied all questions and answers into their individual notebooks. The teacher collected these notebooks afterwards and provided constructive feedback.

Conventional Teaching in the Controlled Group

In contrast to the experimental group, the control group (12 Science A) experienced conventional teaching methods. The teacher read and explained every line of Acts 4 and 5 without utilising modern ICT facilities or DI. 12 Science A was then given the same set of questions to answer individually in their notebooks. After collecting these notebooks, the teacher corrected them and provided constructive feedback.

Methodology

The study made use of quantitative methods, focusing on experimenting with DI in teaching MOV to grade 12 students to improve teaching skills to enhance English language competency in

students. A quasi-experimental research design with non-probability sampling was used, involving one class as the experimental group and another as the control group. The action research employed a quantitative method to collect data. The results of pre-test and post-test data analysis were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Research design

The researcher used an experimental design that begins with a presumed cause and examines its effects, following Kumar's (2011) description of the first way of studying cause and effect relationships. DI was treated as the independent variable or cause, and students' understanding of the lessons was the dependent variable or effect (Kumar, 2011). To determine the impact of this teaching strategy, the researcher applied the intervention and compared the results of two groups of students, one serving as the control group and the other as the experimental group

Sample

The total population of the study was 60 students (12 Science A & B), out of which 30 students were put under the control group and the other 30 under the experimental group. It was convenient for the researcher to conduct interventions as the researcher was teaching English to the two sections. Since both sections contained an equal number of students and belonged to the science stream, they were expected to possess the same level of intellectual capacity. This ensured fairness in assigning any section to either the control or experimental group. While the experiment group was taught with different teaching methods to suit their learning styles, the control group received the same content through a single conventional teaching strategy.

Remedial classes for the control group were planned if their post-intervention scores were lower than the experimental group's. However, the post-intervention test indicated that the control group's result was better than the experimental group, and thus, remedial class for the control group was cancelled.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical consideration was upheld throughout the research. Consent from the principal was sought prior to the commencement of the research. Students were informed about the purpose of the research, and their consent was obtained. The warden and matron were briefed on the research objectives and procedures for border students, while parents of day students were informed beforehand. Pre-test and post-test data were analysed confidentially, with each student assigned an alternative number to ensure anonymity.

Findings

A pre-test was administered prior to assigning participants to the control and experimental groups in order to assess their level of comprehension of the play MOV and to identify the areas in which they required support. The pre-test comprised three types of questions, designed for a total of 20 marks, including five multiple-choice questions (MCQs), two short-answer questions, and one long-answer question. These questions were intended to assess students' knowledge, skills, and values related to the text. The questions included five multiple-choice items based on Acts 4 and 5 of MOV:

1. Who ultimately saves Antonio in Act 4?
2. What does Portia ask for as payment for her legal services?
3. What is Shylock's reaction to the Duke's ruling in Act 4?
4. What does Bassanio give to Portia without knowing her true identity?
5. In Act 5, where do the characters reunite?

The short-answer questions were:

1. Explain how Portia and Nerissa plan to test their husbands' loyalty in Act 5.
2. Discuss the role of disguise and deception in Acts 4 and 5. How do Portia and Nerissa use their disguises to achieve their goals, and what does this reveal about their characters?

The essay-type question was:

- a) Examine the resolution of the play in Act 5. How do the unfolding events contribute to the overall themes of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation?

The results, presented in Table 1, indicated no significant difference between the sections in their pre-test scores.

Table 1

Pre-Test Scores of 12 Science A and 12 Science B

Class	Mean	Median	Variance	Std. Deviation	Range
12 Science A	14.82	15.00	14.32	3.78	15
12 Science B	14.97	16.00	16.21	4.03	14

The mean scores for Class 12 Science A and Class 12 Science B were 14.82 and 14.97, respectively. The median scores of 15.00 for Science A and 16.00 for Science B indicate that half of the students in each class performed above these values, suggesting that a large proportion of students achieved results higher than the overall average. The variances of 14.32 and 16.21,

together with standard deviations of 3.78 and 4.03 indicate relatively low levels of score dispersion. This suggests that students' performance within both groups was fairly consistent, with scores clustering closely around the mean. Therefore, based on these scores, the researcher selected Class 12 Science B as the experimental group for the study. This decision was based on two main reasons. First, although the mean score of Class 12 Science B was lower than that of Class 12 Science A, students in Class 12 Science B were observed to be more manageable, stayed on task, and worked independently without requiring frequent teacher support, whereas Class 12 Science A students were comparatively more hyperactive and required greater supervision. Second, the researcher was teaching English to Class 12 Science B, which made it more practical and convenient to implement the intervention.

Based on this justification, the experimental group was taught using differentiated instruction while covering Acts 4 and 5 of MOV over a four-week period. Students who stayed on track and demonstrated quicker understanding were provided with more challenging, higher-order tasks, while those who required additional support were taught using scaffolded strategies, including YouTube videos and teacher-guided explanations. ICT tools such as video lessons and PowerPoint presentations were integrated to support diverse learning styles. Tiered activities were implemented based on pre-test performance, with students grouped according to readiness levels and assigned tasks aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy. Collaborative learning structures were used, where students first discussed questions in their groups and later regrouped to share expertise, ensuring peer learning and reinforcement of concepts. Finally, students consolidated their learning by recording the questions and answers in their notebooks.

Following the four-week intervention period, a post-test was administered to both groups to assess the effectiveness of DI implemented in the experimental group (12 Science B). Table 2 shows the scores of the two groups.

Table 2

Post Intervention Test Scores of Experimental Group (12 Science B) and Control Group (12 Science A)

Class	Mean	Median	Variance	Std. Deviation	Range
12 Science A	18.50	19.00	15.16	3.89	14
12 Science B	15.00	14.00	20.25	4.49	18

The analysis of the post-test results shows different patterns of performance between the two groups. In the control group (Class 12 Science A), the mean score of 18.50 indicates a clear improvement from the baseline. The median score of 19.00 shows that half of the students scored below this point, suggesting an overall rise in performance. However, the variance of 15.16 and the standard deviation of 3.89 reveal a wide range of scores, denoting that while some students

improved significantly, others improved only slightly. In the experimental group (Class 12 Science B), the mean score of 15.60 also shows improvement, suggesting that the differentiated instruction had a positive impact. The median score of 14.50 indicates that half of the students scored below this value, reflecting some change in the distribution of scores. The variance of 20.25 and the standard deviation of 4.50 show an even wider spread of scores than in the control group, suggesting that although many students benefited from the intervention, the level of improvement varied considerably among them.

Discussion

The primary objective of the action research was to assess the effectiveness of DI in teaching MOV to grade 12 students, guided by two principal research questions: (1) How effective is differentiated instruction in teaching MOV to grade 12 students? and (2) What pedagogical strategies can be recommended for teaching the play at the higher secondary level?

Grade 12 Science B, which was chosen as an experimental group, provided teachings that incorporated modern ICT tools, including video lessons, PowerPoint presentations, and teaching directions such as flexible grouping, peer learning, and tiered instruction for four weeks, while Class 12 Science A was used as a control group. Both groups were administered a pretest in order to determine a baseline score before intervention with the experimental group. A post-test was administered to both sections at the end of the intervention. It was discovered that while both groups had improvements in scores, the control group had a larger increase in the mean scores.

The increase in the mean score of the experimental group suggests that the use of DI in teaching MOV to grade 12 students was effective. The experimental group's mean score increased from 14.97 to 15.60, demonstrating positive impact of the intervention, but it was surpassed by the control group's larger increase from 14.82 to 18.50. This means that DI does not always imply greater impact in a large classroom. In this regard, Ismaji and Morina (2018) argued that differentiated instruction is often implemented ineffectively because of large class sizes.

In regard to variability, the experimental group demonstrated a noteworthy increase in variance following the intervention, reflecting a wider distribution of student performance levels. This suggests that while DI benefited certain students, it may not have aligned with others' learning styles. This is not an easy task since learning strategies which are preferred by some students will not work with others (Tomlinson, 2001). The effectiveness of DI may also have been influenced by the time allocated for the intervention. A four-week period may have been insufficient, as Jager (2017) identified time constraints as a major challenge faced by teachers. In terms of the performance stability of the control group, despite an increase in mean scores, variability seems stable. This could indicate that students perform better when teachers explain each line of the play in simple language. This finding aligns with Moodley (2013), who reported the need to use translated handouts when teaching Shakespearean plays.

Conclusion

Based on the current research findings and discussions, it could be concluded that in a setting where students are required to undertake the same standardised assessments, teacher-directed instruction may provide more uniform preparation. Further, since MOV is written in Early Modern English, students may have benefited more from line-by-line explanations by the teacher, which conventional instruction tends to provide. Nevertheless, the comparatively consistent improvement observed among students in the experimental group suggests that DI reinforced learning, even if it did not surpass traditional methods. This pattern of results indicates that the approach holds potential, but its impact may not have been fully realised in this study. The constraint might have been in the implementation process, including the teacher's developing understanding of DI strategies and the challenges of adapting these strategies to diverse learning profiles. Additional professional development and targeted training in DI may enhance its effectiveness in future applications.

Overall, the action research was successful, as reflected in the students' improved performance. Notably, the overall mean score in English improved from 64.75 in 2023 to 68.12 in 2024 (Council for School Examination and Assessment, 2024). Future research should continue to explore how DI can be optimised to complement conventional pedagogical approaches and better support diverse learners.

Limitation

There can be several limitations that may have influenced the outcomes. The effectiveness of DI was likely constrained by the teacher's limited training and experience in applying the strategy, which may have resulted in inconsistent or incomplete implementation in the experimental group. *The Merchant of Venice*, a text written in Early Modern English, may have disproportionately favoured traditional line-by-line explanation. The sample size and the short duration of the intervention further restrict the generalizability of the findings, as longer exposure to differentiated strategies might produce different results. Finally, the reliance on standardised assessments as the primary measure of achievement may not fully capture the broader learning benefits that differentiated instruction aims to promote.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is recommended that teachers receive comprehensive professional development in DI to ensure accurate, consistent, and effective implementation. Future studies should extend the duration of the intervention to allow teachers to refine instructional practices and students to have ample time to adapt to differentiated strategies.

It may also be beneficial to apply DI across a wider range of texts and subjects to assess its impact holistically, particularly with materials that do not pose significant linguistic barriers.

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